Of Serial Killers and Strangers

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Of Serial Killers and Strangers

by MistandThyme

Summary

After a sudden snow storm leaves Hannibal Lecter stranded in the cold with a broken down car, he is forced to seek shelter nearby. The man that answers the door has shrewd, guarded eyes that seem to see too much and a pack of hounds at his heels.

He is rude.

He is bitingly perceptive.

And for once in his life, rather than infuriated by the man's lack of manners, Hannibal finds himself utterly fascinated.

Or,

In which Hannibal Lecter has a bad day, a snow storm is brewing, and Will Graham receives a rather strange visitor.

An alternate first meeting.

In Which There is a Snowstorm

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal had always considered himself a pragmatic, practical sort of person beneath the frills of his hedonism. He did what had to be done and he did it well, with no room for simple mistakes or miscalculations.

And yet his current predicament was testing that theory.

The Bentley gave another miserable sound, a squealing groan, before yet again cutting out. Hannibal was tempted to try the ignition one more time, but it hadn't helped the last five attempts, thus he was forced to admit defeat. A lesser man would've slammed his hands on the wheel in frustration and while Hannibal enjoyed the occasional flourish of violence, he couldn't lower himself to such a boorish display of emotion, even on a deserted road in the middle of nowhere. Instead, he allowed himself a scowl and made a soft tsking noise with his teeth.

His phone had just enough battery and signal to inform him that he was stranded in the Wolf Trap district of Virginia, lucky given the snow presently falling had blanketed any visible landmarks from sight. Unlucky, given Wolf Trap was a good several miles from anything close to resembling civilisation.

This was partially his own fault. Out of habit, Hannibal almost exclusively drove on back roads where cameras and police presence were scarce. This tactic usually served him well when out on errands or transporting his latest pig, but in his haste, he'd forgotten to check the weather forecast.

His first mistake, the one that had set the ball rolling on this downwards spiral of inconvenience, was that he'd failed to procure the pearls necessary for his next tableau in advance. His usual anonymous supplier had gone on sudden leave for personal reasons (likely in hiding or recovering from a failed hit, Hannibal suspected, but he wasn't one to pry), so his only option was to travel out of state and purchase some in cash. The pearls were at present nestled in his coat pocket, but their acquisition wasn't much comfort now faced by this predicament.

As the well adjusted adult he was, he called his breakdown cover providers and sat there listening to the droning elevator music, hitting the correct button when prompted until eventually he was connected to a human. It was a tedious process as he gave his name, customer profile details and explained himself to the utterly uninterested woman on the other end. Every few seconds, she would take a sip of a drink, the sound of wet swallowing like nails on a black board to Hannibal's frayed temperament.

"*Alright, sir, we'll send someone out to you as soon as they're available*," she droned, fingers clacking against an invisible keyboard.

“How long do you think that will be?” he asked, watching the snow deepening by the minute. A fine layer of it was forming on the glass windscreen, obscuring the outside world.

There was a pause and a long, grating hum. “*Due to the weather and your remote location, you could be looking at 4 to 5 hours, sir. I’d recommend maybe getting a coffee or something*.”

Hannibal clenched his jaw to refrain from pointing out that if he had the ability to nip off to a cafe for a drink he wouldn’t have called in the first place. “I see,” he said measuredly. “Is there really no possibility of having someone here sooner?”

“*Apologies, sir, but we’re experiencing a high volume of calls today. If you have any further issues, please don’t hesitate to ring back*.” And with that, the line went dead.

Hannibal stared at the darkened screen and his glaring reflection for several moments, taking a deep breath to sooth the desire to snap the woman's neck. It was unfortunate she’d hung up before he had the chance to ask for her name. A pity.

And now he was left alone with a broken down car, a phone on 20% battery, a snow storm on the horizon and four hours to kill before help could potentially arrive.

“I should have invested more time into mechanics,” he murmured. He had a cursory knowledge of how a car functioned. At least, it was enough knowledge to know how to tamper with them, but not enough to know how to put them back together again. That was him in a nutshell, wasn’t it? So quick to break the teacup, but rarely with the patience to glue it back together.

But there was no point in lamenting. There were better things to be doing.

Hannibal had a vehement dislike of snow and all things cold, so the prospect of sitting in his car and burning through the battery to keep the heating on didn’t appeal to him. A cursory look of his surroundings revealed little in the way of houses, but he could make out trees and what appeared to be a driveway about a hundred yards along.

Any house would do. If the owners weren’t in, then Hannibal would simply make himself at home without them. And if they were in, then he was confident enough that he could coax out enough sympathy for at least several hours of respite and perhaps a warm drink.

Mind made up, he buttoned up his coat, pulled on his emergency supply of hats, scarves and gloves, and ventured out into the cold.

The walk felt longer than it should’ve, up the road and turning into the barely visible driveway. What was less than a quarter mile walk lasted a small eternity, knocked and blown about by the flurrying wind, his sight masked by the monotony of white.

The snow bothered him less than it used to. He’d spent his youth chasing the sun in southern Europe. France. Italy. All to melt the cold that’d settled in his bones after that faithful January of his youth. But he was older now and enough of the milder Baltimore winters had eroded away that flinching reaction he’d long held when faced with a chilled draught of air.

The sound of snow flattening under his shoes used to conjure up the voices of unfamiliar men, and the bubbling, churning of a pot over the stove. The bite of the cold would remind him of the taste of his own blood and a mild, runny stew filled with the first meat he'd eaten in months. Now he simply walked and bundled up warm, finding the Virginia landscape far more ordered and constrained than the Lithuanian wilderness of his once home.

There was a bend in the drive, the dirt track changing from packed earth to the crunch of gravel.

At last, he saw it, a little boat sailing on a white ocean.

The squat building poured warm light across the earth like trickles of honey, the glow unperturbed by the biting gale and flurry of snowflakes. Hannibal redoubled his efforts and hunkered against the cold, not bothering to mask the crunch of his approaching footsteps.

As he got closer, there was a sudden chorus of barks from inside. Not just from one or two dogs, in fact, it sounded like an entire menagerie of the creatures.

Hannibal saw a flicker in the window as someone moved about inside and he mentally checked that his scalpel was stashed in its dedicated sleeve pocket. He had a second tucked into his sock garters, but that was a last resort.

The porch creaked as he stepped under its cover, a curtain across the front door window obscuring the room beyond. All he could make out was the vague suggestion of furniture.

Hannibal knocked three times. A short, neat succession of raps.

And then he waited, hands loosely held at his sides so he didn't give the impression of hiding something.

And then he waited some more, the dogs continuing to bark and whine.

And then he waited even more, half tempted to knock again.

Finally, there was shuffling from inside and an impression of a human voice speaking in the soothing manner one uses to comfort small children and animals. A shadow covered the doorway and the curtain twitched to one side as a pair of eyes peered out at him and swiftly disappeared again. The lock clicked and the door opened several inches.

"I don't know you," a voice said. The accent was nondescript, American and held the lingering hesitation of someone that didn't speak unless they absolutely had to.

"My car broke down just down the road. Help won't arrive for several hours and it's quite cold out here," Hannibal explained. "I was wondering if you could offer some assistance."

The door opened a little further, revealing a slither of a man.

He was about Hannibal's age, although a little younger and leaner. One word came to mind when Hannibal inspected him, taking in the worn blue of his Henley jumper, the holes in his socks, the tangled mop of dark curls and the scraggle of his facial hair.

Bedraggled.

Feral was a close second.

“Did you get lost? These roads are rather out of the way,” the man replied, his eyes obscured behind a pair of thick rimmed glasses. He shifted from foot to foot, clearly trying to keep the tsunami of hounds at his ankles at bay.

“I made the mistake of relying on my satnav for direction. I think it got a little confused,” he said with a somewhat sheepish glance.

The man pursed his lips, blue eyes flashing to Hannibal’s face for a moment before scrutinizing the snowy front yard. “What’s your name?” he asked stiffly.

The way he spoke made Hannibal suspect something had made the man wary, so he reached into his coat pocket and pulled out his card. “Doctor Hannibal Lecter.”

A pale hand, smaller than his own, but calloused and defined with muscle, snatched the card and turned it over to confirm his story. After a few more moments, the man sighed with a pained grimace, but relented.

“A psychiatrist is slightly better than a murderer, I suppose,” he said, shoulders finally relaxing. “I hope you like dogs. I have coffee or hot chocolate if you want a warm drink.”

The irony wasn’t lost to Hannibal. “A coffee would be greatly appreciated.”

Stepping aside, his host allowed him in. Much to Hannibal's surprise, the dogs were well trained, mild mannered beasts, and they merely sniffed and wagged their tails at him as he entered. He gave each of them a pat before they lost interest in him and wondered back to their beds.

The house was warm, with a well stocked fireplace to one side. Fishing memorabilia lined the walls, several bookcases crammed with texts filling the spaces between. It was messy, but not overwhelmingly so. Piles of papers and empty mugs covered every available surface, but the floor was mostly clear (if littered with a fine veneer of dog hair). A bed sat in the centre of the main room, the duvet unmade and the sheets rumpled. Clearly used.

Interesting.

The man had already retreated into a small kitchen, so Hannibal followed, finding him tapping at a cracked phone screen. Upon noticing Hannibal, he glanced in his direction and put the device away.

“I was just texting a co-worker to say you’re here,” he said, turning to take down two mismatched mugs. “I gave them your name.”

Co-worker, not friend. Another notable titbit.

“You take your personal security seriously,” Hannibal observed. Smart, cautious. The man knew a predator when he saw one and was careful to clip its claws before the hunt could

begin. Texts and calls were kept on record for years after the fact, their names now bound together in something permanent and observable. Inconvenient.

The man worked on the drinks with his back to Hannibal. “I’ve heard too many stories of good Samaritans getting killed by the people they help. It pays to be careful, especially out in the country.”

“Likely wise,” Hannibal conceded. “Out of interest, what is your name?”

“Oh, uh-- Will,” he said as if he wasn’t used to introducing himself, taking down a jar of instant coffee as he went. Hannibal tried to not sneer at it.

“Will, I must again thank you for your hospitality.”

The man grunted in reply as he added water and shoved the mugs into the microwave. Hannibal strongly considered grabbing the hunting knife off the kitchen counter and slitting his throat for his crimes against coffee, but knew that he was for the moment bound to good behaviour. Instead he stood there and watched as a small dog chewed at his shoe laces.

“You wouldn’t happen to have a phone charger, would you?” Hannibal asked, looking for an excuse to snoop around and learn more about his host.

“Oh, um—sure,” Will said, glancing up. “There should be one on my desk.”

Thanking him, Hannibal stepped back into the main room, taking his time to peer at the bookshelves and the photos propped up on the mantelpiece (In amongst the gratuitous number of dog photos was Will stood knee deep in a river, holding what appeared to be a large salmon. In another was an unsmiling older man sat beside Will, both with matching blue eyes and stern jaws. The last was of a younger Will, his hair cropped close to his scalp and dressed in an immaculate police uniform). The entire place had a sense of isolation and oneness, as if it was carefully crafted for the purpose of its owner's comfort and untouched by outside forces.

In a way, it almost reminded Hannibal of his own home.

The desk was cluttered, but he found the cable easily enough and set his phone to charge. He lingered there, glancing over the strewn papers and he recognised some of them as essays, each marked in slashes of harsh, blood red ink. From beneath one of the essays, he saw the corner of a photograph and in his curiosity, he pushed the page aside.

He froze.

Footsteps approached him from behind, a waft of burnt coffee announcing their owner. Hannibal very carefully relaxed his muscles and placed on an indifferent mask, anything to conceal the sudden spike of white hot tension that'd driven nails into his spine.

“Shit,” Will said, setting down the mugs on the desk and peering around Hannibal's shoulder. “I shouldn’t leave those out. I wasn’t expecting guests.”

Hannibal looked at the man again, this time through new eyes, searching for slither of understanding, something that would tell him *why* the man had photos of his latest tableau spread across his desk. “Crime scene photos?” he asked, already knowing the answer. He hoped the tightness of his voice would be taken as simply shock at seeing something so graphic.

Grimacing, Will gathered up the images and tucked them into a nearby folder. “Erm, yeah. Sorry, I know they’re not easy to look at,” he mumbled, an ever deepening crease forming between his brows. Something about his tone sounded like a lie, but Hannibal couldn’t tell exactly what was off.

“I believe I recognise the background in one of those. It’s the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, is it not?”

Will pursed his lips and took his coffee and the folder over to a worn in armchair. The faded colours of the cushions told Hannibal that this was his favoured seat and it creaked faintly as he slumped into it. “You’re right. If you’re a fan of the place, I’m afraid it’s going to be closed for a while. It’s currently an active crime scene. I’d be up there again today if it weren’t for the snow.”

“Ah, are you a police officer?” Hannibal asked mildly. The photograph on the mantle was quite old and he didn’t quite fit the brisk, black and white mundanity he often associated with local law enforcement, so he doubted it.

“No, consultant profiler is the closest thing to a title I have. Special agent, maybe? FBI bloodhound was one I heard a while back.”

Hannibal raised his eyebrows, for once not having to feign his surprise. Clearly Jack Crawford had acquired a new tool since his last peek behind the curtain. “The crime must be quite noteworthy if the FBI are involved. It’s strange to see violence so close to home,” he murmured, taking a seat in the only other chair available. It was overstuffed and smelled strongly of dog.

The man watched him from beneath his hair, the frames of his glasses preventing Hannibal from making eye contact. His stare was somehow piercing, rather like an ice-pick in the way it seemed to slide easily through the surface of Hannibal’s skin. What did he see beneath? How much truth could he discern? Just how sharp was Agent Crawford's newest blade?

“Death is always closer than any of us are truly aware of,” the profiler said, more to himself than Hannibal as he opened the file, leafing through documents and photographs. “Normality is the wood with which sadists and exhibitionists carve out their aberrations. To mock and to upset that sense of banal safety is part of their design. The Chesapeake Ripper has never been concerned about maintaining peace.”

Hannibal allowed his eyes to widen and he leant forward in the chair. “The Ripper? He’s active again?”

A slightly startled look crossed the man’s face, as if realising Hannibal was there for the first time. “Fuck, I shouldn’t have said that,” he muttered, rubbing his eyes with his palms.

“They’ve been trying to keep it out of the press to prevent a panic.”

“I promise that my lips are sealed on the matter. I would hate to cause a ruckus,” Hannibal said earnestly. “It’s been years since the Ripper struck last. I think most had hoped he’d stopped or moved elsewhere.”

“No, he’s been biding his time,” Will explained. “He was waiting for the right moment to begin again.”

“It must be daunting to be faced by a psychopath as bold as he is,” Hannibal said, enjoying how Will slouched in his armchair as he considered the pages of his file. When sat at that angle, the fire light illuminated his curls with a golden shine and the slight damp sweatiness to his skin made it almost glow.

The man's lips pinched together in a way Hannibal now understood meant that he disagreed. “I don’t think the Ripper is a psychopath,” he replied softly.

“No?”

Will shook his head, his mouth ajar for as moment as he gathered his thoughts. “He’s... ah-- he's something unique, psychopath is just the word closest to what he is, but it doesn’t capture his whole. I’ve seen a lot of psychopaths and their works, but he’s different somehow, something else. There’s not a word for what he is.”

Fascinating.

“Do you believe he was born or made to be what he is?”

“Both,” Will said, before scrunching his face. “Neither. I sometimes think he made himself. A self made monster wearing the skin of a man. Something that should've been culled at birth, but slipped through the cracks and learnt how to feign humanity. He could look you in the eye and be as kind as the next person, but deep down he’s another thing entirely else, entirely other.”

Exquisite. This man’s mind was enrapturing.

Hannibal swallowed but otherwise gave no outwards reaction. “Your monster sounds as if he will be hard to catch.”

At that, Will let out a single laugh, a deep, barking sound. “Doctor Lecter, I don’t think he’ll be caught unless he intends to be. I think he kills far more than what we know of. The sounders, they’re his grand performances, they’re what he *chooses* to show us. But I think there are more that go under the radar. Disappearances and accidental deaths so benign that people never look deeper. We could spend a century looking for a link and never find anything more than coincidences.”

This was dangerous. This man was dangerous. But the danger tasted so sweet on his tongue that Hannibal was powerless to sate his hunger, driven by his basest instinct for more. “An insurmountable challenge, then. It must be easy to find the Ripper's case tedious.”

Will rubbed his fingers against the smooth page, running over the lines of Hannibal's latest work. “No,” he murmured. “I should, really. The scenes go cold so quickly, it’s like trying to grasp onto air, but there’s something intoxicating about them. When I slip into his mind, it’s cold, but warm like blood. Chaotic, but so ordered it could be a library. Controlled, but so bursting with passion and desire it makes me feel faint with it. It’s like nothing I’ve experienced before. It’s art.”

“You see beauty in the Ripper’s work?”

Turning his face away, Will curled his hand and chewed at his cuticles. “Fuck, you're a shrink. Swear you won’t think I’m insane?” he asked.

“There is little you could say that would shock me, Will.”

“Then, yes,” he hissed. “Shit. Yes, I think his work is beautiful. It’s also vile and heinous, but I think that’s part of the appeal. Beauty from pain. Art from ruin. Pleasure from suffering.”

“Create splendour and rapture from that which previously held no worth,” Hannibal said, leaning forward in the chair.

Suddenly, the man’s mouth opened and he stared at Hannibal, meeting his eyes for the first time. “That’s it,” he whispered. “That’s what he's doing! He takes pigs that he sees as worthless and he elevates them to something better in death, something he can enjoy.”

He went very still, fingers digging into the arm of the chair until his chuckles went white.

“Will?” Hannibal pressed.

His Adam’s apple worked, a listless, unfocused edge to his gaze. “The trophies,” he whispered. “He doesn’t keep them as *trophies*. A leftover kidney just rots over time, loses its beauty. There’s no pleasure to be gained from that. Doctor Lecter, if you had a cut of prime beef and were asked to enjoy it, what would you do?”

Oh, what an intelligent creature this was. So fast. So entrancing. Hannibal wanted to keep him.

“I would likely open one of my cookbooks and find a suitable recipe.”

“He’s eating them. That’s it, he’s eating them. Fuck. Sorry, Doctor, but I need to make a call quickly,” he said, pushing himself to his feet.

Hannibal allowed himself a smile as he watched Will stumble away, fumbling with his pockets. One of the dogs nudged at the serial killer's knee, so he reached forward and gave its soft ears a gentle rub.

From the kitchen, Will’s hushed voice could be heard and Hannibal bathed himself in it, tipping his head back and closing his eyes.

“*Jack,”* he began. “*I’m calling about the Ripper case.”* A pause. “*No, not yet, but I know why he takes trophies. He eats them.”*

There was a series of pacing footsteps and a long sigh. "*I mean it, Jack. He has no reason to keep them in jars. He doesn't care enough about the victims for that, but eating them fits the rest of the profile. Hell, we already know he sees his victims as pigs, so is it really that big of a jump?"*

Hannibal wanted to make Will breakfast. Perhaps he would bring a protein scramble over in Tupperware as a thank you gift. He had some lung that could be put aside, and the thought of watching the profiler's lips part as he ate the evidence of a crime he was set to deconstruct made Hannibal delighted in a way that he hadn't experienced since Florence.

"*No, Jack. I'm telling you it's not a compulsion, no more than buying mincemeat from the butchers is. He doesn't see the difference."*

Hannibal agreed silently with the assessment. There was him and there was livestock. While he had a particular taste for long pig, it was more of a luxury than a necessity. Part of him wondered if Will was just another animal to be feasted upon, or if he was a monster to feast *with*.

"*Yeah, don't worry about me. I'll visit the labs once the roads clear up."* Another pause. *"Yeah, I'll keep you updated."* Hannibal heard the tell tale exchange of farewells and settled deeper into the chair, turning his attention to the hearth.

Moments later, Will reappeared and collapsed back down, chugging the remains of his coffee and swallowing what appeared be aspirin.

"Sorry about that," he eventually spoke, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Headache?"

"Yeah, a little. My boss is, ah—very invested in the Ripper case. It's all I've been working on since the body turned up," he admitted with a long sigh.

Hannibal was glad that he still haunted Jack Crawford's thoughts. Every day he lived in freedom was another day Crawford lived with the lingering guilt of his failures.

"Perhaps we should allow the Ripper to rest for now? I'm sure he won't kill again while we're talking," he suggested. While there was something perversely intriguing about hearing of his own crimes, he knew that the longer they remained on the topic, the more likely something would slip through the cracks. He suspected this man wasn't quite as blind as his predecessors.

"There's another case actually. I probably shouldn't tell you more but..."

"A little late for that perhaps?" Hannibal offered with a slight smile.

Will snorted and nodded jerkily, reaching over to a nearby table and pulling over a manila file. "Yeah. Before the Ripper started his sounder, there was a spree of hangings. The case is mostly on the backburner now, but I think I'm close to cracking it. Would you like to give it a look?"

Hannibal tilted his head forward. “I can’t say I’m much of an expert in murder investigation, but I can certainly glance at it.”

The file changed hands and Hannibal opened it with the same curious glee a child would have on Christmas day. There was something sordid, something thrilling about brushing his fingers over pages marked by the FBI's headers.

He began to read and mentally pieced together the image of what lay beneath the text and images.

Fledgling killer, six bodies. New, but determined and with a clear vision in mind. Someone hurt her and she never saw justice and now she replays the moment of her first kill to cling to the memory of the power she took back from them. It’s the domination she seeks.

“What do you have so far in your profile?” he asked.

Will grimaced for a moment, his lips twisting. “My personal profile is very different to the going theory.” It was a bitter admission, clearly the product of many a terse disagreement. “They’re saying its a man, 40s, possibly with a history of domestic abuse. While I agree the killings are angry and spiteful, possibly by someone that wants to take advantage of a position of power, I don’t think it’s a man and I think they’re young.”

Clever thing. “What led you to that conclusion?”

Nibbling at his nails, the man stared at the wall. “The bodies are untouched, no bruising or defensive markings, nothing to indicate a physical altercation. The team thinks the killer intimidates the victims into hanging themselves, and the window was left wide open in each case, like a staged break in, but there’s drugs in their systems and I’m not convinced all of these victims would’ve gone without a fight. The drugs aren’t too out of the ordinary for geriatric medicine, but they're too consistent across the cases to ignore. I think they’re manipulated while compromised mentally.”

“Poisonings are more typical of female killers, yes?”

“Generally, but not exclusively,” Will agreed, rubbing his bottom lip with his thumb. “Women serial killers often enter into medical fields like nursing; it gives power and access to medication that other careers don’t offer. There’s an entire field dedicated to hunting medical serial killers. We looked at the care and medical teams that the victims had contact with, but nothing came from it. It didn’t help that my colleagues fought me every step of the way.”

Hannibal hummed under his breath. “What about bank and agency staff? Temporary staff are often not documented as thoroughly as permanent staff. They can change workplace frequently, and are more likely to move around unquestioned than an un-uniformed stranger.” It was a trick he’d taken advantage of in the past.

“You’re right,” the profiler said, sitting up straight. “That would fit with her being younger as well. An unfamiliar, but friendly face that slips away in ensuing chaos, barely leaving a mark in the paperwork.”

Looking down at the file again, Hannibal perused the crime scene photos with a sort of glee. “Why do you think she started? Is she a monster like your Ripper?”

Will let out a sudden noise, something bordering on a snort. “No, no. I think she’s your usual victim of environment with a predisposition to violence. Something triggered the killing spree and I suspect it’s grown into a compulsion or obsession.”

Picking up a photo of the earliest scene, Hannibal tilted his head to one side. “This one is different. There’s injuries on the body,” he murmured, eyeing the purpling contusions littering the old woman's corpse.

“The first one, yeah. I considered that maybe it was the mark of inexperience and refinement of technique over time, but you think differently, don’t you?”

“It seems... significant,” Hannibal said, handing the photo across.

A line formed between the profiler's brows. “I didn’t see this one in person. They didn’t contact the FBI until the third killing,” he admitted. “But, I think I see what you mean. There’s anger here, not panic. Do you think the killer knew this one?”

Oh, definitely. “It’s a worthwhile possibility.”

The profiler set the photo down and grabbed a notebook. The pages were half falling out, each covered in handwriting so scratching that Hannibal thought it was somehow more indecipherable than the cipher he used for his patient notes. Pen clasped between his teeth, Will's leg bounced up and down.

“So we're looking for a young, female individual with a healthcare background and possible connections to the first victim,” he summarised. His face cracked into a grin and he looked in Hannibal’s general direction. “That’s certainly more concrete than anything else we’ve had.”

“It pays to have a interlocutor to make sense of our thoughts at times.”

Scoffing, Will shook his head. “Bloody shrinks. I’m sure as hell not paying your therapy fees.”

“Hmm, maybe I should ask the FBI for compensation for my time instead,” Hannibal replied easily.

This time Will actually laughed, throwing back his head. Much like the rest of the man's body language, it was a stilted sound, awkward and too harsh for pleasant company. His grin showed too many teeth. His shoulders permanently hunched as if curled up to attack. Hannibal adored it.

“Yeah, well, I’ll have fun explaining that one to Jack,” he said.

The snow eventually abated enough for Hannibal to make out the dip of the road in between the lines of distant fences and trees.

As he waited for help to arrive, Will remained quiet as if absorbed by his thoughts, only occasionally speaking or shifting in his chair to make another note. Hannibal entertained himself with one of the nautical knot reference books on the bookshelf. He'd always enjoyed incorporating ropes into his designs, but had never fully dedicated himself to the skill.

The dogs were also a surprising highlight.

The hair clinging to his trousers bothered him immensely, but he kept a lint roller in his car, so he was prepared for the damage control necessary once he left. And there was something endearing about how one of the larger dogs (he was named Max judging by Will's murmured reprimands) bumped into his leg and rested his head on the seat with wide doleful eyes, his tail swishing back and forth. Hannibal found that petting the creature would make the swishing go faster, the more affectionate, the faster it would go. Every time he relented and withdrew his hand, Max would knock into his leg again and make a small huffing noise.

It was amusing.

Hannibal decided he would take extra sausage for the dogs when he brought Will breakfast. Perhaps he could bride them into becoming his allies.

The liminal, surreal experience was finally brought to an end by the ringing of his phone where it sat attached to the borrowed charger. Hannibal answered and was informed that a mechanic with a tow truck would be arriving soon.

"I believe that's my sign to take my leave," he announced as he put his phone back in his pocket.

"Rescue finally on their way?" Will replied, dragging his eyes away from his notes for more than a moment.

"Indeed. It only took them five hours," Hannibal said as he began collecting his belongings and wrapped himself up in preparation for the snow.

Will rose from his seat and followed him to the door, holding it open and blocking the dogs from escaping as Hannibal stepped outside.

"It was nice meeting you, Will," Hannibal said, smiling at the rarity he'd stumbled across, a golden nugget in a river of dirt.

The man met his eyes for a moment, before glancing down at the ground again. "Yeah. You weren't so bad, for a psychiatrist."

Hannibal humoured him. Somehow he found his particular brand of rudeness almost endearing, excusable in the light of his fragile charm.

"I'm glad to hear that. Oh, and if you ever wish to have someone to bounce your ideas off, you are welcome to contact me," Hannibal replied, carefully transcribing his personal phone number onto the back of his business card in clear, unmistakable print.

Will took the card again and looked down at the writing with what looked like the beginnings of a smile twitching at his lip. “You gave plenty of your own input, Doctor Lecter. But thanks, I appreciate it. It’s—er... it’s rare for someone to be so... tolerant of the way I think.”

“You have a wonderful gift. Every one of your thoughts was a pleasure to behold.”

Will’s cheeks were tinged pink, possibly from the bite of the air, but Hannibal liked to imagine it was more. “Thank you. Oh, uh-- Just give me a second.” The man dove back inside and Hannibal peered after him, watching as Will shuffled through the disarray of his table, before tearing a scrap off an old envelope. He then scribbled something down and came back over. “My number,” Will offered. “I’m not great about texting people first or even responding, but have it anyway. I might reply.”

Hannibal took the paper and glanced over the scrawled numbers. It was barely legible, but he would manage. “Thank you, Will.”

Their farewells were brief. Will wasn’t the type to linger and he seemed to be itching to get back to work, so Hannibal left him to it. It would not be the last time they would meet. He would make sure of it.

There was a van ready and waiting beside the Bentley and Hannibal greeted the driver with far more cheer than he would’ve mustered several hours previously. As the repairman spoke, Hannibal nodded along and internally wondered how soon he could procure a bouquet of Sweet Williams.

They would make a nice addition to his next tableau.

Chapter End Notes

So, this was intended as a one shot, but there's potential for more if people are interested. Do let me know!

I have some other Hannibal fics in the works, so we'll see how things go.

In Which the Ripper Strikes Again

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will Graham was nothing if not consistent.

Consistently sleep deprived, consistently strange, and consistently lonesome.

And in the spirit of consistency, he woke up with a gasp, a strangled yell caught halfway up his throat. Despite the cold weather, he was burning hot and dripping with sweat, the sheets clinging and twisted around him like ravenous snakes. A spike of panic accompanied his sudden wakefulness and he fought his way out of bed, falling to the ground on his hands and knees with a jarring thud.

“You’re okay,” he whispered, pulling at his sweat damp hair with clawing fingers and screwing his eyes shut until they ached. “You’re okay-- You're-- you’re not mad. They, they said this could happen.” Each word was a stumbling mantra and a breathless prayer, ordering and taming the frenzied racing of his mind. His heartbeats were pounding against his ribs, his lungs burning with the need for air, but left unsated by the halting, shuddering gasps rocking his body.

“You’re okay,” Will repeated, pressing his forehead to the floor.

“You’re okay.”

A cold, wet nose touched the back of his neck and the sensation helped ease him into reality again. Looking up, Will found Winston sat before him, dark eyes watching him with what almost looked like concern.

“Hey buddy,” Will said, slumping against the bed frame, knees pulled to his chest. “I’m sorry, did I wake you?”

He beckoned the dog closer and ran his fingers through his thick fur. It was soft and warmed by body heat and each brush soothed the lingering touch of panic. Winston didn’t seem to mind his owner's state and nuzzled up to him, weighing into Will’s side. The weight felt grounding, soothing.

“It was just a nightmare,” Will explained, petting the animal's velvet soft ears. Whether he was explaining it to himself or to Winston, he wasn’t sure. “I’m okay.”

Anti-NMDA receptor encephalitis.

It'd been caught in its beginning stages during a psych ward evaluation session. A mild case that’d responded well to the first line treatments of steroids, immunoglobulins and plasma exchange. It’d been a short stint in hospital, followed by outpatient care as soon as they

allowed him his freedom. Jack had even waited two whole weeks before calling him in to look at another fresh corpse.

Nothing about it had felt mild. Even fully cured, it's marks were still ingrained onto his mind like permanent echoes. While not in the throes of loosing his sanity, he still didn't feel *right*. At night auditory hallucinations kept him awake, a choir of agonized screams that whispered and murmured, yet also deafened him. Night terrors still shook him awake. Visions of impossible things still clung to the corners of his eyes, there one moment, gone with the next blink. Garrett Jacob Hobbs still stood in the corner of rooms, his voice a repetition of 'see, see?'.

"There's my good boy," Will murmured, rubbing his cheek against Winston's neck. "I promise I'm feeling better."

The dog licked his knee in gentle reply.

The doctors had said it could be almost two years before he felt fully normal again, or at least, as normal as he ever felt. Time had never seemed so slow as they had over the last several weeks. Recovery was like a sluggish trickling and he often found himself frustrated with his body for betraying him, for being so humanly fallible.

The Ripper scene hadn't helped his healing brain either.

Somehow it would've been easier if faced with something purely violent and repulsive. His brain knew how to handle gore and pulverized flesh, simply cordoned off and tucked away in some recess of memory. However, the artistry and precision of the Chesapeake Ripper only seemed to inspire visions of horrific ecstasy, unable to be ignored or shifted out of sight. Instead, his dreams were stories and vivid plays, each clothed in blood and scripted in wails, dances performed in the breaking of bones and slicing of muscle.

Will ran a hand down his face before he found the strength to stand.

Winston followed at his heels as he shuffled into the kitchen and he fumbled with the faucet in the dark. Once the water flowed free, he dunked his head under ice cold water to feel the pain of it against his skin. Pain was something real, tangible.

When he emerged, his hair rained droplets onto his shoulders, trickling down his back and soaking into his already damp t-shirt. His hands shook as he took out a glass and soothed his throat with a drink of water, feeling the cool weight settle the persistent low fever that clung to his sleep. Each sip made him feel a little more human, a little less like a drifting shade.

He sagged against the kitchen table, staring out of the window at the night-time landscape. With his eyes adjusted to the dark, he could make out the blanket of fresh snow that'd settled across his land, the white painted onto the relief of the tree line, the naked branches jutting outwards like bleached antlers clawing for the sky.

In the silence, he could almost hear the clip clop of hooves against stone. There was the sensation of warm breath against the back of his neck, too animal to be human. It wasn't real.

Glass now empty, he set it down, but his eyes were drawn to a small rectangle of card that gave him a moment of pause. He touched the business card, unable to see the writing, but already knowing what was there.

“So, you were real,” he murmured in wonder.

Part of him had convinced himself that Doctor Hannibal Lecter was simply another hallucination, a manifestation conjured by his spiralling isolation. The entire ordeal had been so surreal, so odd that he didn’t blame himself for the lapse.

The man was strange.

Not strange in the way Will was. No, he'd been the type of strange that most would've labelled as ‘charming' or ‘eccentric'. The type of strange that drew people in flocks as if to observe a particularly interesting art exhibit by some long dead European artist, this time dressed up in an eclectic mix of blue plaid and scarlet paisley.

On the other hand, Will’s type of strange generally had a repellent effect. People used words like ‘abrasive’ or ‘callous' for him.

He wasn’t sure what to make of their conversation. It’d been weird, quite frankly. Weird, but also addictive. The psychiatrist had drawn out his thoughts with the ease of a seasoned fisherman landing a catch and had gifted his own thoughts in return.

Will often saw the way he made others tense with the way he spoke, but the immaculate man had seemed, if anything, drawn to how Will discussed death and vice. His eyes had been so intent, so still Will may has well have been reading aloud poetry.

Will could read people as easily as he read crimes scenes. His gift, his curse.

Usually he read their discomfort, their distaste, their fear or their pity when they looked at him. Sometimes he saw their desire to use him like a tool or their desire to dissect his mind to reveal it’s inner workings. But Doctor Lecter was an enigma.

He was a man made of stone, difficult to read and even harder to provoke. His face was something serene, his emotions distant things that barely left their mark on the curated surface. There’d been flashes of hunger in the taught lines of his body, but the kind of hunger that was less clinical interest and more of a disturbingly fierce fascination.

Drumming his fingers against the card, he replayed their conversation over and over again, searching for some sign of dismay, some hint of derision. He found it distinctly lacking.

How odd.

Finally, sleep began to tug at his eyelids again, a yawn pulled out from between his teeth. With a scratch to Winston's chin, he returned to his bed, pulling out a towel from his bedside cabinet to cover the patch of sweat on the covers. Settling beneath the sheets, he watched his dogs sleep and listened to the sound of the wind against the side of his small sanctuary.

The blaring of his phone woke him, the sound piercing his eardrums with a fine toothed sadism. He scrambled to silence it, fumbling the screen without looking at the caller ID. Only one person would call him before 7am.

“Jack?” he grumbled, wiping the dust from his eyes and fighting back a yawn.

“*Will, we have a situation*,” came the growling reply. Jack sounded actually angry, far harsher than his usual degree of general acidity. “*How familiar are you with Freddie Lounds?*”

The name alone filled his stomach with lead. “Far too familiar. Red hair, writes drivel, walking obstruction of justice case.”

His morning was already off to a bad start.

Jack grunted. “*That’s the one. Someone's leaked the photos of the Ripper scene and she got her hands on them. An article just went up on Tattlecrime about half an hour ago and soon the mainstream news sites will catch on. It’s going to be big trouble*.”

“Shit,” Will replied, too tired to think of a smarter response.

“*And Will? She mentioned you in the article, got some photos of you leaving the scene. It’s all bull, but I thought I should tell you.*”

His belly clenched with what he recognised as the beginnings of nausea. Scrunching up his face, he resisted the urge to claw out his eyes.

“Okay, thanks for the heads up.” He didn’t feel very thankful. “I’m still snowed in, so at least I can’t cause more negative press in the meantime.”

“*Yes, well, stay safe out there. Just give me a call of you have anything for me,*” Jack said.

“I will, Jack. Don’t worry.”

Jack hung up and Will dropped his phone onto the bedsheets, stretching out and rubbing his face with a long groan.

Too awake to fall asleep and too groggy to get to work, he instead let out the dogs to take a bathroom break in the frigid snow and got to fixing himself a slice of toast and a mug coffee. Once the door was closed again and a warm drink sat between his hands, he sat before his laptop, scowling.

Against his better judgement, Will navigated his way to Tattlecrime's homepage. He suspected that going out of his way to read the article constituted a form of self harm, but he tried to not linger on that thought for too long. He had taken some aspirin in advance to take the edge off the headache he knew was brewing.

And there it was, emblazoned across the website’s front page for all to see.

EXCLUSIVE: THE CHESAPEAKE RIPPER RETURNS

Ladies and gentlemen, this is a Tattlecrime exclusive with breaking news. Inside sources have revealed that on Tuesday the 15th, the Chesapeake Ripper killed again, leaving the mutilated remains at the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore.

The victim was Joseph Graves, 25, a carpet repairman and avid charity fundraiser from Annapolis, who was last seen alive leaving Walmart Friday night. This beacon of the community will be sorely missed and just proves that no one is safe from this psychopath's reign of terror. Everyone lock your doors and check your windows, the Ripper has two more left on his latest killing spree and you don't want it to be you or your loved ones (for great discounts on personal security devices, check out the link below!)

Lound's sensationalist brand of journalism always made him feel a bit like there were centipedes wriggling under his fingernails. It was sickly, puerile. Tasteless.

The background check on Joe Graves had revealed the dead man to have been anything other than a beacon of the community. Even his friends and family had referred to him as 'a bit of an asshole' and he'd been reprimanded multiple times for his overly aggressive attempts at 'charity fundraising'. Numerous calls had been made to the police after incidents of him refusing to leave residential properties.

Of course, he hadn't deserved to have his intestines and lungs removed while he was still alive, his fingers each severed and left pinned to the museum's donation box, but Freddie's writing was, as always, bordering the line between embellishment and lies.

Jack Crawford, 48, the head of the FBI's behavioural analysis unit, refused to comment on his department's failures. Despite the Ripper's continued brazen performances of violence, the authorities seem powerless to stop him. Our tax dollars supposedly go to the best of the best, and yet with no arrests on the horizon, we can't help but wonder if they're up for the task.

Will Graham, 37, was spotted at the scene. Previous readers will recognise this man as the killer of the notorious Minnesota Shrike. This unqualified consultant witnessed the deaths of the entire Hobbs family after an interview gone wrong. Disqualified from the FBI due to mental instability, this is a man intimately familiar with the minds of killers.

Only several weeks ago, Graham was aledgedly admitted into hospital by psychiatric recommendation after he was deemed a threat to himself and others. Anonymous sources suggest that he experienced vivid hallucinations and losses of time weeks before his admission. Us here at Tattlecrime question the FBI's use of this volatile and unpredictable individual.

With the Ripper on the hunt, our lives in the hands of the bumbling BAU and a deeply disturbed man, how will we ever feel safe in these uncertain times?

Subscribe for future updates.

Will banged his head on the kitchen table, his mug jangling dangerously and spilling several drops of coffee onto the wood.

How the hell had Freddie found his medical records? Surely that had to be a HIPAA violation?

“Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck,” he spat, clawing at his hair until his scalp ached. “Fuck.”

It was one thing to have an encephalitis induced mental breakdown, but it was another to have that information publicly splashed across the internet for anyone to see. What if his co-workers saw? Oh god, what if his *students* saw?

Fuck.

Wrapping himself tightly in his arms, he took several steadying breaths to attempt to claw back a sense of stability. Only the whining of his dogs succeeded in cutting through the fog of his distress.

“At least I don’t have to go in today,” he whispered, fumbling for his glasses.

Two days later, the roads had cleared enough for Will to return to Quantico.

There had been no politely worded email from HR informing him that his services were no longer needed, so at least the article hadn’t gotten him fired just yet. He still had a headache leftover from Lound's unwelcome foray into his medical records, but the blinding panic and horror had simmered down into a far more manageable emotion. Anger.

When his morning class arrived, they remained silent as they took their seats, bags and coats shuffling but voices remaining absent. Perhaps they had seen the article or perhaps they had the good sense to know when their professor was in a foul mood.

“Good morning,” he said, once they were settled. He knew his voice carried an edge to it, but he didn’t care as he clicked onto the title slide of his lecture. “Today we will be looking at Eldon Stammets and the abuse of power by medical professionals. This case study will be on the end of year exam, so I recommend you take thorough notes.”

The hour passed as comfortably as it could. Will lingered on the edge of Stammet's psyche as he lectured, the musty dullness of the mushroom man’s mind almost a balm against his own raging emotions.

Eventually, the final slide appeared, the face of a half rotten body splashed across the wall. Growths of mushrooms and flowering bodies flourished from the ruined matter beneath.

“Any questions?” he asked the room.

No one raised their hands. No one ever did and he was perfectly content with that.

Alana Bloom stood in the doorway, watching as students flooded out of the lecture hall. Once only stragglers remained, she approached, her heels clicking against the ground with slightly hesitant steps. She smiled at him, but it didn't reach her eyes.

They never did, not anymore.

"I see you survived the snow," she greeted, watching him as he packed away his things.

"The electricity stayed on, so I just got to spend a couple days with the dogs," Will replied, pushing up his glasses to shield himself from her probing inspection. "It wasn't so bad."

"I'm glad. It might've been good for you to take a short break, with what's happening. Jack has been pushing you hard lately."

Will shrugged and shuffled his papers to give himself something to do that wasn't looking at Alana. "Yes, well, we're all hands on deck at the moment. You know how Jack is with the Ripper."

Her smile faltered and the waves of concern that rolled off her body language in the stiffness of her shoulders and pinch of her brows made Will want to crawl up the walls or simply disappear in a puff of smoke. It was saccharine and sickly and somehow made his skin crawl more than crime scene photos ever did.

"I know," she murmured, running her hand across the desk. "Please promise me you'll tell me if it's too much. You're still in recovery and..."

"I promise," he cut in, not wanting to hear more. "I will, Alana. I swear." It was a lie of course, but Will had enough experience lying to himself to use the skill against others as well.

"Good, I'm glad." This time her smile was genuine, creasing at the edges of her eyes, but it was a smile of eased worry, not the warmth they'd once been edging towards.

At one point, Will had almost thought there could've been *something* between them, that maybe their pleasant conversations could've become something more, maybe lunch, or a coffee, hell, even dinner perhaps. But those times were long gone now, washed away by the blood of Garrett Jacob Hobbs and sterilized by the heat of his encephalitis fever.

With a lack of an alternative, she'd done his psych evaluation after the deadly use of force encounter and despite his best efforts to sanitise his mind and present himself as something stable, it'd left a stain on their relationship. She'd seen a glimpse of the thing he tried so desperately to lock away and it had rightfully driven her away. When the sickness had set in and loosened his tentative grip on reality, she'd grown more and more concerned, until she'd formally recommended inpatient treatment. In a way, he owed her his life for the discovery of the disease ravaging his brain, but the experience of being forcefully detained and locked away for his mind to be prodded had left him scarred deeper than he yet wanted to admit.

Like a glimpse into his darkest fears, it had been a vision of his worst future. The strike of betrayal left him choking, suffocated.

Will looked at her finally, not meeting her eyes. It was a cataloguing glance to take in her woollen coat and colour matched scarf. Her nails were freshly painted and her hair looked...different. Nice, but different. “Did you get a haircut?” he asked with uncertainty.

Alana brushed a strand behind her ear, a blush of pleasure high on her cheeks. “Just a trim and highlights. My old mentor is holding a dinner party next week and I thought I should change things up a little.”

Ah. That explained it.

With envy, Will realised that Alana felt something a little more that just friendly acquaintanceship for this *mentor* of hers. While he knew it wasn’t his place, the realisation stung and he yet again cursed himself for always seeing too much.

“Well, I, um, hope you have a nice time,” he replied, knowing that was the kind of thing a co-worker was meant to say.

“Thank you, Will,” she said, like giving a dog a treat for good behaviour. It rankled. “Jack asked me to step in for your afternoon class. He wanted you to visit his office when you’re available.”

Will stiffened, a curdling mix of dread and excitement suddenly coiling in his gut. “It’s the Ripper, isn’t it?”

The way her face dropped and her body tensed was answer enough. “He didn’t say, but... it’s quite possible.”

His teeth ached. Was it disgust or hunger?

“I should go,” he announced, slinging his bag over his shoulder. “I shouldn't keep Jack waiting.”

The Ripper had indeed killed again.

Less than ten minutes later, Will was sat in the passenger seat of Jack’s car. And about an hour later, they pulled up in a rural parking lot, the gravel expanse taken up by FBI vehicles and local police cars. Jack flashed his badge as they pulled into one of the few remaining spaces.

“Where are we?” Will asked, peering out at the flurry of activity and colour in amongst the skeletal trees, the flashes of yellow police tape and the black of FBI uniforms.

“Patapsco Valley State Park,” Jack answered, buttoning up his coat and pulling on a pair of gloves. “We’re going on a short hike. The body was found by an elderly couple on their morning walk.”

They got out of the car, the doors slamming shut with resounding clunks. Their footsteps crunched over the gravel and Will lingered in Jack’s shadow, using him as a barrier between him and the swarm of people roaming around.

The forest was pretty.

On another day, Will might've brought his dogs there to frolic through the undergrowth and bound over the branches, but today it was tainted with police tape and grating voices. Winter had stripped the trees of their leaves and the earth was soft with the decay of fall, still wet from the partially melted snow.

Eventually they reached a tent set up to one side of the path, cordons blocking the trail ahead. Inside, crime scene investigators crowded over computers and evidence bags.

“The scene is further ahead,” Jack explained, watching the chaos unfold. “There’s a bridge over the river. It’s difficult to miss.”

A call over the radio later and Will saw the flocking retreat of investigators as they left the scene. The tableau was waiting for him.

“Alright,” he said, stuffing his hands into his pockets. “I’ll be back in a bit.”

He began the short walk.

As Will followed the trail his breaths and the sound of his footsteps were the only things he could hear, everything else falling into the background once the tent fell out of sight.

The woodland was speckled in the last remnants of dirt stained snow, no birds or animals yet brave enough to face the chill. It felt almost dead, unmoving, like an imitation of life preserved in stone.

Footfalls crunched.

He could see the suspension bridge now, a dark blot of wood and metal in among the claws of naked branches. Two dark arches mounted the footpath, thick cords of wire hanging across the river’s expanse to cradle the slats of wood arranged beneath.

The sound of moving water and flapping fabric met his chilled ears.

Wood creaked beneath him as the bridge took his weight, yawning and whining every step he took closer. Had the Chesapeake Ripper followed these very same footsteps only hours before? Had he seen what Will was seeing, felt the cold pinch the back of his neck and heard the churn of distant water?

Will stood before the towering wooden support, for a moment simply listening to groan of settling wood, the metal wails of the wires and the flap, flap of cloth.

Flap.

Flap.

He tilted his head upwards and saw a vision, a spirit cloaked in ethereal white.

The corpse was suspended from the wire supports, twin incisions marking her abdomen, while long swathes of sheer white fabric hung from her otherwise naked form, twisting and moving with the gentle wind. It extended well past her discoloured feet, giving an illusion of otherworldly resplendence.

“I prepare her body elsewhere to prevent blood from staining the fabric,” he murmured.

Brown hair had been left loose about her shoulders, the waves of it natural in appearance, but too perfect to not be of human design. River reeds and white flowers with jewel red centres had been twined through the careful arrangement of tresses. There was something distinctly posed about how she was hung in the air, as if to evoke images of old paintings and ancient gods, palms raised bare to the judgement of the sky.

“She’s a Naiad,” Will realised, stepping closer. His fingers itched to reach out, to touch, to adjust the fabric until he was satisfied. “A spirit of fresh water, but a spiteful creature nonetheless. This beauty hides the rotten core within, and this pig should be remembered as what she was beyond the facade of her beauty.” His voice was a low purr and he had to turn his head away to reclaim what he could of his composure, before he slipped too deep into this seductive, foreign mind.

When he looked again, he peered up at her eyes, only to find them missing, leaving two gaping chasms in an otherwise serene face. The holes had been filled with more of the white flowers, while pearls suspended on transparent fishing line fell as decadent tears. Fishing hooks had been threaded into her mutilated eye sockets, holding the lines in place.

Naiads had been gifted with prophecy, but the Ripper had taken both her eyes and her future as retribution for her transgressions. “Any future she saw for herself was undeserved. She cries riches but they will never make up for what was lost, what I *took* from her.”

It was magnificent.

Exquisite.

He wanted to be sick.

“That is my design.”

He stood there longer than was likely necessary, etching the image into his mind for later perusal. The ghost of the Ripper stood beside him as a horned shadow, a calm, ordered presence inside his head that neither resented him nor taunted him for being there. In fact, it welcomed him closer and smiled indulgently at his lingering awe.

Finally, he wrenched himself away and trudged back to the rest of the team in the evidence tent.

“So, the Ripper?” Jack immediately asked as the crime scene investigators returned to their posts by the bridge.

“Yeah, it’s him,” Will replied, scuffing his shoe into the moist ground and burying his hands in his pockets. “Any idea of what he took? Other than the eyes?”

Jack looked grim as he fiddled with his pen. A nervous habit that had only become more pronounced since the sounder had begun. “We won’t know exactly what he took until the autopsy, but the incision shape could indicate kidneys.”

“I hear devilled kidney is pretty good,” Will said mildly, before dipping his head at the scowl Jack threw his way. “Any ID on the victim?”

“Nothing from fingerprints. Dental records will take longer to get back to us. Did you get anything from the scene? Any hints, clues?”

“The Ripper never leaves enough evidence to reconstruct his movements with. I’m not a miracle worker,” he explained yet again. Sometimes he felt like a broken record. “The scene is an inside joke. She’s dressed as a Naiad, a Greek water nymph known for being jealous and untrustworthy. They could supposedly see the future, which is why he took her eyes. We already know the Ripper is well educated and upper class, but I suppose we can add a fan of Greek mythology to the profile as well.”

The hard lines of Jack’s face deepened, his teeth barred as he let out a frustrated noise. “That’s it?”

Will shrugged. “As far as concrete characteristics go, yes. Although, I do question why he chose this location in particular. It feels as if he... improvised the final design at the last minute. The Ripper is meticulous, almost obsessively organised, so he must have a reason. This area is wild, overgrown, not his usual style for his tableaus, while the flowers feel significant, but, ah-- separate from the main message of the piece."

There was a secondary meaning, something spur of the moment, but it escaped him, like the final dots were unable to connect.

There was something missing.

Jack frowned and stalked over to the rest of the BAU team, Will following behind him like a lost child. In among the throngs of qualified and certified agents, he always felt like an outsider, a half baked failure that didn’t really belong there.

“Brian, do you have a name for the flowers yet?” he demanded.

Zeller glanced up to address Jack, deliberately avoiding Will with his eyes. “We're getting there. There’s a surprising number of white and red flowers out there,” he said.

Jack let out a frustrated noise and was called over by another group, leaving Will to awkwardly stand there without anything to do. His laptop was back at Quantico so he couldn’t start working on a write up and there wasn’t anything else to do at the scene.

A cough drew his attention and he found a pair of dark eyes watching him over the top of a computer monitor.

Katz raised her eyebrows at him. “I’m guessing that Doctor you texted me about didn’t turn out to be a serial killer in the end,” she said with a small grin.

“No, just a man with a broken down car,” Will replied, allowing his shoulders to relax out of their usual wary hunch. “I made him a hot drink, help arrived and he left again.” Doctor Lecter hadn’t actually drunk the coffee he’d made him and had abandoned it on the desk to go cold, but Will wasn’t sure if that had been intentional or not.

Katz grinned and patted his arm. “Well congratulations on the successful social interaction, then. I’m very proud of you.” There were teeth in her grin and Will found himself smiling back.

He'd found Katz caustic at first, but he was beginning to get used to her abrasive brand of humour. She never pitied him or treated him like a delicate teacup one wobble away from shattering and it meant more to him than he could ever express to her in words.

“I’ve found it!” Price called, head snapping up. “It’s Dianthus barbatus, resident of Southern Europe and parts of Asia.”

Jack rushed back, looking over the man’s shoulder at the laptop screen. “What else do we know about it? Cultural significance, literature references?”

Tongue caught between his teeth, Price squinted at the computer and tapped at the keyboard several times. A sudden stillness took over his form as his eyes went wide, the colour draining from his skin. “They're--" he hesitated, staring across at Will with trepidation and fear reflected in the lines of his facial features. “They're commonly known as Sweet Williams.”

Oh.

“Fucking hell,” Jack swore.

Oh.

Will could feel the eyes on him, but he was too busy trying to remember how to breath. It was as if the world had suddenly turned its axis by ninety degrees, leaving him unsure of what way was up and what way was down.

“It’s a greeting,” he whispered.

A greeting for *him*.

Like a match catching light, everything else slotted itself together to complete the picture.

Sweet Williams in the eyes of a prophetic creature.

The corpse laid out in a forest, the kind of forest Will often visited with his dogs, where he thrived and felt most himself.

Pearls tied together with fishing line and held with hooks.

I can see you, Will. Can you see me to?

His body felt distant, voices dimming down to a maelstrom of humming noise. His heart beat was the one constant, the heavy pounding like the swinging of the pendulum.

“He knows who I am.”

Jack was pacing back and forth, spitting mad. “It's Freddie Lounds. It was that Tattlecrime article, I just know it. He’s using her to monitor the investigation and it’s compromised an agent's safety!”

Will was frozen in spot as people continued to look at him, murmuring and whispering. Jack was on the phone to someone now, yelling over the hubbub.

He wanted to go home, but even his sanctuary felt somehow tainted now.

The Chesapeake Ripper had been watching him. It was more than just the Lounds article, he just knew it. The forest, the fishing hooks, that suggested a far more intimate degree of knowledge than what could be drawn from a single article. Subtle enough to only be noticeable to him, but obvious enough to show its deeper meaning.

What was worst of all was that Will wasn’t wholly afraid.

The shaking of his hands, the racing of his heart, it was caused by *excitement*, not fear. He was giddy with the high of adrenaline, the putrid spike of exhilaration.

The Ripper wasn’t threatening him. He was *acknowledging* him, like a tip of the hat or a small nod of the head. He had marked Will as someone significant enough to be noticed, someone worthy of his time and Will hated himself for how sickeningly honoured he felt.

What was wrong with him?

Katz was watching him and when he looked back at her, she stood up.

“Hey, Jack. I’m going to head back to the lab and get things prepped for the body,” she said, standing behind their boss.

Jack glanced at her momentarily, still holding the phone to his ear and nodded once in dismissal. As she headed out, she grabbed Will by the sleeve and pulled him away from the scene.

“Come on, Graham,” she said. “You’ve done your thing so there’s no point in you standing around looking lost. Jack drove you here, right?”

Will shrugged off her touch, but settled into walking beside her through the forest trail. “Yeah, he did. Uh—Thank you... for that,” he said, awkwardly readjusting his glasses.

“It’s not everyday a psycho leaves you flowers,” she replied easily, taking out her keys and unlocking her car. “Jack can call you if he really needs you.”

Katz's car heated up once they were on the roads and she leant across to get the seat warmers going.

“Any music preferences?” she asked as she fiddled with the radio stations.

“I’m not fussy,” he said, melting into the all encompassing warmth. It was a relief after the bitter chill of the winter air.

In the end she chose a generic pop station and while it wasn’t exactly Will's thing, he appreciated how the low level noise drowned out his more obnoxious thoughts.

The majority of the drive was quiet. Will propped his head against the window and watched the Maryland scenery slide by. He counted buildings and watched the blank faces of other commuters through their car windows. Small flocks of birds occasionally darted up onto the air.

The sky was grey.

“You know, if you need a place to crash for a while, I have a spare room,” Katz murmured as they crossed the state line into Virginia. “I know your house is pretty isolated.”

She was worried about him. It wasn’t the nauseating, patronising worry he was so used to. It was genuine concern, the type you would have for a friend.

Will breathed in and turned his head away, blinking away the emotion in his chest. “Thanks, Katz. I’ll be alright, but I appreciate it.”

“Are you scared?” she asked, drumming her fingers on the steering wheel. “I’d be shitting bricks if the Ripper sent me a personalised corpse.”

“If he wanted me dead then it would've been me hanging from that bridge,” Will stated. He didn’t say it out loud, but there had been nothing overtly threatening about the display. It was a welcome, an invitation to dance. “He likely has a plan for me, but I don’t think I’m in immediate danger.”

“*Huh*, how comforting,” she said, arching an eyebrow at him. “Will, that sounds fucking horrific.”

“I’ve got seven dogs. They’ll keep me safe.”

“Fine, but you have my number if you change your mind.”

“I— Thank you... Beverly.”

He meant it.

Once back to Quantico, he hung around in his office, doing little but stare at the wall or spin around on his chair. His computer remained off, emails unchecked, his phone switched to silent.

His office was in the bowels of Quantico and he suspected that it'd once been used as a broom cupboard before he'd come along. There was a slither of a window high up on the concrete wall, too small to let in any real light and too awkwardly positioned to give a view of anything but the grey sky.

The corridor outside remained quiet during the day, usually only traversed by cleaning staff or the occasional lost student. Will had grown to recognise the footsteps that frequented it, so he almost groaned when he heard the slamming of double doors and the heavy, thudding strides of an irate man.

Ten seconds later, Jack Crawford thundered into his office, his presence taking up every remaining space in the tiny room, his face the picture of fury. "Where the hell were you?! You can't just up and leave from a scene like that!"

Will span around in his chair to face him, setting his chin in place and lacing his fingers together over his stomach. "Afternoon, Jack. Katz wanted a hand with something. I didn't think I was needed, so I left with her."

"You should've said something," the man seethed. "With what's happened, you shouldn't be going anywhere without someone knowing about it."

"Katz knew," Will pointed out lamely. "You were on the phone, so I didn't want to cause a fuss."

Jack took a deep breath and paced across the small space back and forth, like a giant among miniature bookshelves.

"Both Dr Bloom and I want a team assigned to you."

Will frowned.

"No," he replied. "That's too much."

"An agent, then? You can't be left alone."

Will glanced at the clock and bristled a little. It felt too much like being coddled, like he was a delicate thing that couldn't be trusted to be alone. "I'd really rather not," he muttered, standing up and reaching for his bag.

"If you won't have an agent watching you, I will have you put in protective custody."

It was a threat and they both knew it.

Will continued to pack away his laptop, winding up his charging cable and stuffing it away. He patted his jacket pockets to check he had his keys and wallet. “There’s only so many times you can threaten to lock me up and have me watched before I begin to think you don’t trust me, Jack.”

He could see the pained frustration in the way Jack held himself. The man was only a few prods away from slamming his fists against the desk, but Will wasn’t in the mood to deescalate the situation.

“Will, we have two bodies and one more to go. The Ripper just mentioned you *by name* and you expect me to leave you unprotected?” There was an underlying grief to his words, a note of almost desperation, an unspoken plea for forgiveness.

Will raised his head and took a deep breath.

“This wasn’t a threat. It was a greeting.”

“And that’s supposed to comfort me?” his boss asked.

“The Ripper is, uh, violently defensive, I suppose, but I’m nowhere near cracking the case. I’d be in danger if I knew his name, knew his face, but I don’t. He’s toying with us. He wants to play a game with me and I imagine he’s looking to torment you.”

“How likely is it that his game ends with you in a pine box? Do you expect me to bury you?” Jack asked, teeth bared.

Will looped his bag over his shoulder and rubbed at his eyes. “I’m not Miriam Lass, Jack,” he almost murmured, stepping around him to reach the exit.

The way the older man flinched as if struck let Will know he’d landed the blow correctly. In a way, he felt bad about using his grief against him, but the Ripper had already laid out the groundworks, so it only took the gentlest of pushes to send everything swinging into place.

“I’m going home,” Will said, standing in the doorway as he watched the strangely small looking figure of Jack Crawford stare across the room at him. “I’ll call you if the Ripper turns up on my doorstep, but otherwise I’ll be here tomorrow as usual.”

The door swung shut behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for the response last chapter! I've decided to expand this into a full story. I currently have 3 chapters complete, so we'll see how things go.

Do let me know if you enjoyed!

Art of Hannibal's tableau

In Which Breakfast is Eaten

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The text came through as Will settled into his armchair for the evening, a stiff three fingers of whiskey ready and waiting in his tumbler. The ping was soft, almost drowned out by Ellie's growling as she mutilated her newest toy, but Will felt the vibration against his leg.

With resignation he took out his phone, fully expecting an another message from Jack or Alana demanding he go into protective custody. He'd already spent most of his afternoon very deliberately dismissing most of his phone notifications.

What he found surprised him.

Unknown [20:13]: Hello, is this Will of Wolf Trap, Virginia? We met several days ago during the snow storm.

Will reread the text several times before pressing his fingers to the tension knotting his brow. Half of him wanted to reply, while the other half of him wanted to simply delete the message and pretend it'd never been there. Just how many psychiatrists did a single man need in his life? One had been bad enough, but every time he brushed sleeves with the BAU, it seemed another one would appear, ready and waiting to prod at his brain to see what made it tick.

Sipping his whiskey, he enjoyed the sooth fire as it burnt away some of the tightness in his muscles.

"At least he's not actually with the FBI," he reminded himself, repeating the memory of that peculiar day he'd met Doctor Lecter for the first time.

He was an odd man and somehow that oddness complemented his own. For those few short hours, he'd felt almost normal, almost human in his company. It was a feeling he was rarely acquainted with.

Will [20:18]: Good evening, Doctor Lecter. Is the car back up and running?

He wasn't sure why he asked the question, as if he intended to continue the conversation.

Why he kept the number and saved it as a contact was beyond him as well.

Doctor Lecter [20:20]: Yes, thank you, Will. How have you been? I do hope your cases are treating you kindly.

Will stared at the message, wondering how to reply. Somehow texts felt even more contrived than a face to face conversation. He was lost without body language to read, without facial expressions to latch onto, as if asked to write a report with a blindfold covering his eyes.

Will [20:25]: Kindly is not the way I would describe it.

Doctor Lecter [20:26]: Oh? Anything you're able to reveal?

Will [20:28]: I can't go into detail, but one of the cases has gotten personal. I'm still trying decide how I feel about it.

Doctor Lecter [20:29]: Sometimes it's best to allow our emotions to run their natural course. There is no right or wrong answer, only deeper truths to be learned. I trust you aren't in danger?

What truth did it reveal about him that he still shuddered with exhilaration when he thought of the Ripper's scene? That he was sick in head? That he was just as insane as everyone thought?

Will [20:32]: A killer acknowledged me personally. I think he's been watching me somehow. My boss believes it's a threat, but I would be dead if that was what our friend intended.

Will [20:33]: I feel somewhat naked knowing that my home isn't the safe haven I once thought of it as.

There was no immediate response and Will could feel the creeping of insecurity tingle at the ends of his limbs. He swallowed another mouthful of whiskey and prayed it would dull the sensation.

When he did speak, he always said too much. Too much, too harshly, too quick to understand how wrong he was until it was too late.

His phone vibrated.

Doctor Lecter [20:38]: Are you available for a phone call?

Will [20:39]: I'm not *un*available.

The sudden relief he felt was quickly overshadowed by nerves and when his phone began to ring, he allowed himself several calming breaths before he accepted it.

"*Hello, Will*," came the smoothly accented voice he remembered so well.

"Hi, Doctor Lecter." Even to his own ears, he sounded stiff.

"*I take it you've had quite the trying day,*" the man replied, seemingly unperturbed by Will's tone.

"Yeah, that's certainly one way to describe it," he said with an edge of bitterness, taking a long drink. "It's not everyday a monster decides you're worthy of his attention."

A brief pause. "*I take it that the Ripper left another present?"*

"I didn't mention the Ripper," Will pointed out.

Doctor Lecter hummed cheerily and Will could hear him moving about in an echoing space. A kitchen perhaps? "*Apologies, I assumed based on the use of masculine pronouns. Unless perhaps you have another killer vying for your time?*"

"No, no you're right," Will conceded, finally relaxing into the plush upholstery of his chair. "I forgot how observant you are. He left me Sweet Williams and fishing hooks on the body and I don't know how he would know about my hobbies unless he had a more personal source of insight into my life than just a news article."

In the background, the sound of a machine hummed dully. "*Freddie Lounds portrayed you in a rather unfortunate light*."

Will wanted to groan. Of course the one person in his life that didn't know the rotten details of his background had run across them by mistake. Fate had it out for him. "Oh God. Don't tell me you read Tattlecrime."

"*Please don't fret, Will. Do you speak about your interests with friends and co-workers often? It may be possible that he discovered the information through a less direct route.*"

That was an option he hadn't considered. He'd offered the BAU team excess catches before so it wasn't outside the realm of possibility. "I've mentioned it once or twice... I guess, so maybe," he murmured.

"*You have quite the pack of guard dogs, Will. Even if you missed a silent observer, I doubt they would. Animals are far more attuned to the natural environment than us humans are. Have you noticed them acting oddly recently, anything to indicate an intruder?*"

Will looked at the animals lolling about on the floor. Buster was curled up beside Jack, while Zoe was trying and failing to steal away Ellie's toy. Winston was leant against Will's shin, while Max and Harley lounged in front of the fireplace.

"No, they seem to be acting the same as they usually do," he murmured, scratching the top of Winston's head. "Maybe you're right. I just—I only ever feel safe at home and... I don't want to lose that."

"*Your little slice of the world,*" Doctor Lecter murmured. "*I understand your anxiety. It's your barrier and sanctuary from the horrors of normal society. Someone like you needs a place to retreat to.*"

Something tender and sore within him flinched. "Someone like me?" he hissed. "And what kind of person is that, *Doctor*? Lound's article certainly had something to say about that."

The line was quiet for a short time and Will's frustration was mounting.

It always made him feel dirty when personal interest slipped into something more morbid and clinical. He had hoped that, maybe, just maybe, this time could be different, but perhaps he was wrong.

"*Miss Lound's work leaves much to be desired. I only follow Tattlecrime as it tends to be the most up to date source for ongoing Baltimore crimes, but I am aware that much of it is hyperbole*," the psychiatrist spoke. There were thuds and the sound of a knife being sharpened. "*I believe I chose my words poorly there,*" he admitted gently. "*Perhaps I should've said 'people like us', as I admit to having my own retreats and bolt holes for when the outside drudgery grows to be too much. I would feel dreadfully violated if someone were to invade my kitchen, for example.*"

The man had a way with words that Will both resented and admired. Despite his best attempts to stay angry, the fight had left him.

"Is that where you are now?" he asked.

Doctor Lecter hummed and shuffled around. "*I'm presently preparing the meat for my next meal and I plan to use the leftovers for sausage. Cooking has always been one of my greatest sources of comfort*."

"It's a good skill to have. I usually just have what's easiest to throw in the oven."

Tsking under his breath, the doctor made a disapproving noise. "*Eating should fuel both your body and your mind, Will. New sensations, tastes, textures and scents are vital for the full enjoyment of life,*" he chided.

Will smiled slightly, scratching at his scruff. "I'll take your word for it."

For a while he listened to the sound of a knife parting meat and he could've sworn he heard the Doctor humming to himself as he went. It was oddly therapeutic to listen to another person living their life, separate and yet parallel to his own.

"*What time do you leave for work in the mornings?*" Doctor Lecter asked.

The question caught him off guard. "Oh, erm—I guess maybe around 8.20, 8.30. Why? Some kind of new psychoanalysis technique I haven't heard about yet?"

"*Ah, no. It's more of a practical enquiry*."

"Oh yeah?"

"*Indeed*," he continued without hesitation. "*I've been meaning to properly thank you for your hospitality. With the stress you're currently under, I think it may be nice for you to have a proper breakfast to start the day with. I could arrive at, say, 7?"*

Will stared at his phone. "You really don't have to," he protested. "Baltimore is over an hour away."

"*Please, I insist. There is much pleasure to be gained from eating with good company.*"

"I don't think most would consider me good company, Doctor Lecter."

"*Well, I suppose it's good that I am not most, then. I want to make the rest of your family some sausages of their own to enjoy. Would a mix of unseasoned meat and vegetables work? I have peas and carrots that may complement it well*."

Will could tell he was putting up a losing battle. "The dogs are okay. This, erm—It really isn't necessary."

"*Will*," the man said so gently it felt almost like a caress. Will hated how the sound softened him with such ease. "*Please allow me to cook for you and your family as a thank you. I take a great amount of joy from sharing the fruits of my labour*."

Doctor Lecter was a manipulative son of a bitch.

Despite Will's realisation, it didn't change the fact that the manipulation worked it's magic. "Alright," he sighed with a pained grimace. "You can come and feed us. I'm sure the dogs will be overjoyed."

At 7 o'clock on the dot, there was a tell-tale knocking, too brisk and maddeningly curt to be anyone but Doctor Hannibal Lecter. Will had just about pulled on a pair of pants and a fresh shirt as the dogs began to bark and howl in excitement. His hair was still wet from the shower.

Bleary eyed, Will pulled the curtain aside and fumbled with the lock. "Settle down, settle down," he shushed the dogs, praying that they wouldn't immediately inundate their guest.

He opened the door just a crack, holding the handle tight and not yet releasing the chain. "Morning, Doctor!" he called, "I'd recommend standing to one side, otherwise you'll get trampled."

The man smiled at him through the glass and stepped to the side of the doorway, placing what appeared to be a large cooler between his feet. Will unfastened the latch and allowed the dogs to run free in a cascade of fur and thudding paws. They all bounded outside for their morning toilet break, only a couple pausing to sniff Hannibal before they went and joined the pandemonium of barking and sprinting out on the front lawn.

"I see your pack is in good spirits today," Doctor Lecter observed as Jack and Harley tussled about in the grass.

"I usually just leave them to it for a while," Will replied, watching the man pick up his cooler. It appeared to be heavy judging from the white knuckle grip he held it with. "Helps them get their energy out before I go to work. Do you need a hand with that?"

The doctor was dressed in a full three piece suit, much as he had been the first time they'd met. Somehow the one he was wearing today was even more ridiculous than the first, a grey

and orange window pane suit matched with a powder blue tie. On anyone else, the combination would've looked garish, outlandish even, but the man's stern features and dangerous poise somehow seemed to balance it.

Will wondered why Doctor Lecter felt the need to conceal himself behind the loud patterns of his clothes. Just what was trying to hide?

"It's quite alright. Could I have use of your kitchen however? I thought it would be nice to prepare something fresh for you."

"Oh, sure," Will said, holding the door for him as he stepped inside. "Do you, uh, need any help with it?"

Will lead them to the kitchen and Doctor Lecter set the box down beside the counter. He leant over to lift off the lid and smiled across at Will, tawny hair falling loose over his forehead. "No, Will. I came here to make your life easier. Please go about your usual morning routine and I'll let you know when I'm done."

Standing rather uselessly, Will watched as the doctor began to pull ingredients out and set them neatly on the counter top. He saw fresh vegetables and a whole carton of eggs. "Well, erm... if you need help finding anything, just call for me," he said awkwardly.

"Of course." Doctor Lecter removed his blazer and set it over the back of one of the kitchen chairs. "Thank you, Will."

The statement felt like a dismissal, so Will slipped out of the room with as much grace as he could manage. He stood in the main room for several moments, wondering just what to do with himself. His usual morning routine consisted of rolling out of bed, showering, letting out the dogs, getting dressed and scoffing down a slice of toast with a cup of coffee.

Instead of simply wandering aimlessly in his own home, he called in the dogs, portioned out their food and set about making himself presentable. He gave his facial hair a much needed trim and attempted to style his hair into something other than a rat's nest. Will even found a matching pair of socks.

All the while, he could hear the moving and shuffling of someone else in his home. In a way, it was an alien experience, so used to the quiet tranquillity of his own presence that anything other than solitude was unnerving.

As the air was filled with the mouth watering aroma of cooking and he could hear the sizzling of a pan, he was struck by the realisation of just how long it'd been since someone had last made breakfast for him. A decade, at least? Come to think of it, he was the one that always cooked when he visited his Pa. Any of the very few overnight guests he had left long before breakfast.

God, had it been back in college?

Younger than that?

Lingering in the door frame, he watched the other man standing over the stove, flicking the contents of a pan with an easy regularity that suggested muscle memory. His shirt was rolled up to his elbows and an apron (definitely not one of Will's) was tied around his waist with a small bow.

“Would you care to set the table?” the doctor asked, turning towards him. “I’m almost finished.”

Will dug out a pair of placemats from the recesses of his kitchen cabinet, surprised to find them in decent condition. Knives and forks were also placed, before his curiosity got the better of him and he peered around the doctor's shoulder at the plates he was currently garnishing with wedges of tomato.

“What did you make?”

The man glanced at him, the corners of his eyes creasing. “Take a seat and you’ll soon find out.”

Putting it down as another of Lecter's eccentricities, Will sat obediently and watched as the man brought over two plates, each piled high. “Protein scramble, a favourite breakfast of mine. A little egg, a little meat, all good to energise you for the day ahead,” he announced, setting the golden scrambled eggs and succulent meat before Will as if it were a performance. “And to join it, my very own blend of coffee.” From a thermos, he poured out two mugfuls of the deep umber liquid. The smells were almost fragrant, floral with decadent sweetness. “Please dig in.”

Will took his fork and scooped a little of everything onto the tines. He noticed that his guest hadn’t yet moved to eat and he could feel eyes boring into his skin as he took his first bite.

“Mhmm,” he moaned, chewing and glancing up in surprise. The meat was spiced, tender and seemed to melt on his tongue, while the egg was impossibly light and soft. It both tasted familiar and yet miles better than the breakfasts of his childhood. “What's the meat?”

“Lamb. I hear it was quite the spry young thing.”

“It's good,” Will stated, meeting Lecter's eyes.

The doctor seemed pleased, although his face revealed little as he picked up his own cutlery. “A sparkling commendation of my skills. I gather you’re a man that doesn’t give compliments easily.”

Will snorted and dug into the dish, trying deliberately to savour each bite to make it last a little longer. “I give compliments when they’re deserved, Doctor. Most just don’t deserve them.”

“In which case, I am honoured.”

The man ate with the same deliberate intensity he seemed to carry with every action he took. His teeth, unlike the rest of him, were uneven and slightly crooked and they flashed with each

bite.

“I get the impression you encounter flattery and praise wherever you go,” Will murmured. “Do you ever get tired of it? Does the rain of their admiration ever begin to grate, or are you enough of a narcissist to actually enjoy it?”

Doctor Lecter paused and gazed at him blankly, eyes searching for a moment. There was a contemplative softness to his forehead. “It depends, I suppose.”

Will was surprised he’d even answered the question. “Oh?”

“Can a wanderer at once enjoy the chatter of birdsong and yet also find the chicken's squawking tiresome? Some forms of praise are valuable, while others are politely endured.”

Grinning slightly, Will turned back to his plate. “Well played. Do you politely endure *me*, Doctor Lecter? I’ve been told that I’m quite abrasive.”

“I usually find rudeness to be intolerable,” the man said, sipping his coffee and gently dabbling his lips dry. “However, your particular flavour of discourtesy is strangely palatable. It feels as if it is a game between two players, rather than for the pure amusement of one.”

“Are you the other player?” Will asked, raising an eyebrow.

Their eyes met as Doctor Lecter smiled back at him, teeth glinting.

“I do believe I am.”

They returned to their breakfasts and ate in silence.

Will was used to awkward silences, tense silences and silences so pregnant with emotion that they gave him migraines, but this one was quiet, peaceful and comfortable. He felt no need to fill it and instead focussed on filling his stomach.

Once finished, Will was quick to take their dirty dishes. As he washed up, the doctor watched him from his seat.

“Tell me, Will, how are you feeling today? You seemed rather distressed in our call yesterday.”

Will turned on the faucet, touching the water as he waited for it to grow warm. “A little better,” he said, not looking at him. “I suppose the emotions of yesterday got to me, blinded my sense. Realistically the Ripper would have trouble finding my address all the way out here. And the dogs would notice if someone was stalking me.”

“The chances of him stumbling upon your home would be astronomically low,” Lecter agreed.

“On the other hand, it could mean he’s getting inside information about the BAU another way, and I’m not sure that’s good news either. Either way, the investigation is compromised.”

He poured a little dish soap onto a sponge, until it bubbled up between his fingers. “They’ve been pressuring me to go into protective custody, at least until the end of the sounder.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Will saw Lecter lean forward a little. “They believe you could be his next target?”

“Yes.”

Will didn’t intend to sound angry, but the word was almost hissed.

“I take it, you do not? What purpose do you think the Ripper has for you?”

Scrubbing the plates vigorously, Will sunk into his impressions of the last tableau, recalling it’s details and still marvelling slightly at the echoes of its beauty. “The Ripper would never warn one of his victims in advance. They're pigs to him, they don’t deserve the courtesy. No. I, uh – I think he intended to introduce himself to me, personally.”

“He sees you as something above the common pigs, then?”

The question nudged that bud of forbidden emotion in his chest and he looked down into the sink to conceal the humiliating warmth burning at his cheeks. “I... possibly. I’m at least interesting enough for him to notice.”

“I would agree,” the man replied, although Will wasn’t sure exactly what he was agreeing with. “How does it make you feel? To be noticed?”

Will grit his teeth against the swell of emotion beating at his lungs, forcing them back down to somewhere safe and inaccessible.

“That’s a lazy question.”

“And yet, an apt one.”

He didn’t respond immediately, instead taking the time to dry each plate and mug thoroughly, returning them one by one to their rightful place. His guest didn’t speak, as if still waiting for his response. Half of him wanted to deflect, turn the conversation somewhere else, but the other half remembered the unsettling satisfaction he’d felt when he’d confessed to the beauty of the Ripper's crimes.

He knew Lecter wouldn’t cast judgement on him, but the words felt forbidden and too ugly to unleash upon the world.

“I,” Will began, finally turning around to face the man again. He was looking back, his face the picture of serene fascination, as if he genuinely wanted to know how Will felt. “I felt special,” he whispered.

There was warmth in the doctor’s eyes. “Do you often feel special?”

“Only in the derogatory sense."

A pinch of annoyance twitched at his mouth, so fast Will almost missed it.

“And this time?”

Will leant against the counter, shoving his hands into his pockets so he could fiddle with the scraps of lint within.

“This time... it was, er – the good kind,” Will said. It hurt to speak. “It made me feel remarkable, like I mattered. I’m so used to feeling like a freak show that the first time anyone showed the slightest hint of respect for me, it made me feel giddy. Isn’t it pathetic that the only person that's made me feel good about myself in years is a fucking cannibalistic serial killer?”

He wanted to laugh or cry, but wasn’t sure which, so he fidgeted instead.

Doctor Lecter sat up straighter, linking his fingers together over his knee. “Pathetic? No. A terrible tragedy? Yes. You deserve to feel worthy, Will. It’s clear to me that you hide yourself from the sting of social rejection and in doing so, turn against your nature. However, you deserve acceptance and validation as you are, without the need to alter yourself into something more tasteful. I find it regrettable that the world has treated you so poorly. You deserve to feel special.”

Will searched the psychiatrist’s face for some hint of pity, for a hint of disgust or deception. But there was none.

What he'd said was genuine.

A lump formed in his throat and he looked away, swallowing to ease the burning pressure behind his Adam's apple.

“Yes, well – It’s easy to say that, Doctor Lecter,” he croaked, shifting his feet and pulling at the sleeve of his threadbare pullover. “People have good reason to find me *distasteful*.”

“You killed the Minnesota Shrike.”

The name hit him like a back hand across the face and he stared at Lecter in horror. “I forgot Freddie mentioned that.”

“I was aware of the case nonetheless. It was in the news for quite some time, although I was away in Chicago for a conference when the news broke. Wasn't it your remarkable mind that found Mr Hobbs?”

“It was luck,” Will muttered. “Dumb luck.”

“And yet the world contains one less predator because of your actions. He could still be preying on teenage girls as we speak otherwise.”

The praise was dirty against his skin and he began to pace the length of the kitchen. “I was reckless and lucky,” he spat. “I should’ve called for back up, I should’ve waited to confront

him, but I didn’t. The whole family ended up dead just because I wanted to shoot the fucker for myself.”

“Do you regret killing him?” The question was gentle and lacking judgement.

“No.”

“Would you kill him again if the clocks were reversed?”

Will swallowed thickly. He hesitated but finally nodded. “Yes.”

“You despise what you did, yet you don’t regret it,” Lecter observed. “In reality, there was no way to know if the mother and daughter could've been saved. Perhaps the same would've happened if someone else had gone to apprehend him. Perhaps he would’ve killed them and escaped to continue his trail of blood elsewhere. I think the source of your distress is not your actions, but rather the realisation that you enjoyed killing Garrett Jacob Hobbs.”

Will stopped pacing.

His heart was pounding, his palms sweaty.

Raising his head, he found the doctor sat in the chair just as before, his body relaxed, his face the picture of calm, all while Will was unravelling at his feet.

“And what if I did?” he asked.

Tilting his head slightly to one side, the therapist considered him. “If that is your nature, why reject it? Hobbs will still be dead whether or not you despise yourself for it.”

He made it sound so achingly simple and Will wanted to reach out and accept it for himself, but he couldn't. He *couldn't.*

“I... I can't.” It was almost a plea.

“You can’t what?” the man pushed further.

Will could feel himself cracking apart. “I can accept that Hobbs is dead. I can accept that *I* killed him. But I *can't* accept that doing bad things to bad people makes me feel... good. I, I don’t know what that would make me.”

Doctor Lecter stood up, carefully smoothing the creases out of his clothes. When he walked towards Will it was with the gait of someone approaching a predator.

Will almost flinched when fingers touched his cheek, the space between them not containing enough air to properly fill his lungs. The touch was gentle, the skin so humanly warm it made him cold with his own inhumanity.

The pad of Lecter's thumb rested on his cheekbone, neither caressing nor pressing for more.

“I imagine,” Doctor Lecter murmured, his eyes like splatters of dried blood, “that it would make you Will Graham.”

And like that, he dropped his hand, leaving Will slightly bereft and unsteady in his wake.

Momentarily unable to speak, Will watched as Lecter took his blazer from the back of the kitchen chair and slid it into place over his shoulders. He reached back into the cooler, pulling out a bag of small chunks.

“Ah, and here’s the sausage I promised for your pack. Should I leave it in the fridge?”

Dogs.

Will could talk about dogs.

“If you want to befriend them, you should feed some of it to them yourself,” Will said, slowly defrosting from his state of shutdown.

Doctor Lecter looked momentarily perplexed and then glanced at the sausage. “I suppose allies are always welcome,” he said. “Bipedal or quadrupedal.”

He really was a weird guy.

Will felt more at ease and tried to push their earlier conversation out of his mind as he introduced the Doctor to each of his dogs.

He would have each of them sit, introduce them by name and then their guest would give them a portion of sausage and a head pat.

Doctor Lecter didn’t seem like the kind of man with pets and his interactions with the animals just solidified that fact in Will’s mind. He spoke to them in full sentences like they were human, in the same smooth tone he always used. He used their full names and introduced himself as ‘Doctor Hannibal Lecter', while his attempts at petting the dogs consisted of lightly patting to the top of their heads or tentative strokes down their backs.

He took a particular shine to Max, Will’s tricolour collie, although he insisted on calling him ‘Maximillian’ for some reason beyond Will’s comprehension. Granted that *was* his official name, but Will didn’t think he’d ever actually said the whole thing out loud before. But Max was a very good boy and politely allowed the strange multi-coloured human to scratch his ears and wax lyrically about his soft coat.

Eventually the clock hit 8.10 and Will realised that he needed to get ready for work, so both he and the Doctor got dressed to brave the chilled weather. As Will tied his shoelaces, Doctor Lecter stared outside with his dark eyes, seemingly focussed on the long driveway and swaying trees.

“Do you think they’ll insist on protective custody?” he asked, buttoning up his coat.

Will frowned. “I hope not, but it depends on if the they think the Ripper is going to turn me into an ornamental tree or not. My boss lost someone a while ago to the ripper investigation,

so he's not going to listen to my reasoning. As horrible as it sounds, I just hope the final body arrives soon. Once the case starts to go cold again they'll be less worried about the Ripper striking."

Doctor Lecter glanced over at him, lip slightly curved. "Didn't you say that you believe he's active between sounders?"

"Well, yes, but the BAU still thinks he goes dormant. If it means I won't be carted off to some safe house away from my dogs, I'm quite happy to let them believe that for a little while longer."

Rather than appalled by his brazen obstruction of justice, the doctor just seemed rather entertained by the whole thing. Tugging on a pair of supple leather gloves, the man smiled across at him. "In which case, I match your desire for the sounder's end. It would be a dreadful shame for you to be separated from your family. I'll admit, quite selfishly, that I would also be saddened if I was unable to contact you."

Will shifted uneasily under the man's attention. "I thought this was just a thank you meal."

He couldn't understand why the psychiatrist was so personally interested in him. He understood professional curiosity and morbid fascination, but the genuine pleasure Lecter displayed in his company was alien.

"Perhaps, but that doesn't negate the possibility of future meals, does it?"

"I suppose not," he murmured.

An unspoken promise for further meetings lingered in the air between them.

Will was ambushed at work sometime after lunch by Jack and the two stone faced agents that were assigned to be his personal guards. Despite his protests, it was made abundantly clear that both Jack and the people above him would have Will under protection whether he liked it or not. He was ordered to make arrangements for his dogs and allowed a single visit home to pack the essentials before he would be carted off to an undisclosed location for safe keeping.

As he packed his bag full of underwear and his few personal possessions, the news arrived.

The Chesapeake Ripper had killed for a third time.

Instead of driving him to a safe house as planned, his bag was left behind and the agents carted him off to the newest scene.

And as he stood over the bent and twisted remains of a man, forever curled up in a mimicry of grief in a rarely used corner of the Baltimore National Cemetery, Will found himself oddly relieved by the display.

The plain white rows of gravestones were endless, monotonous, the body was the sole interrupting figure in the field of otherwise sanitised death. In amongst the long departed, the mangled remains made a mockery of the order of the place. A defiance against monotony.

The Ripper in his head stood just beside him under the dimming sky, the antlered shadow watching him with an intent gaze.

“Thank you,” Will whispered to it, too quiet for anyone else to hear.

He felt insane for thinking that the tableau was somehow for him, despite there being no explicit signs. Surely it was just his imagination?

There was something almost gentle about the arrangement of discoloured limbs, now bound in rigor. The skin was blotted with the speckled red and purples of livor mortis, too recent to have turned that deep deathly blue. The visible marks of settling blood in the extremities was rare for Ripper scenes as he usually bled the corpses before displaying them.

“It’s recent,” he said, returning to where Jack stood with the others. “What’s the estimated time of death?”

“Between four and six hours,” Beverley answered.

“So, he was in a rush,” Will said.

There was a certain sense of haste and artistic liberty to this scene, different to the previous meticulous displays. It was no less elegant, no less brutal, but Will got the sense that the Ripper was experimenting with his style, pushing himself to do something out of the bounds of his comfort zone.

Jack’s face was set in a heavy scowl as he gazed across at where the body lay. “Tattlecrime received an anonymous tip two and a half hours ago and it was called in half an hour later. Of course, that was only *after* Lounds poked her nose in and got fresh photos first,” he muttered.

The mention of Tattlecrime made Will feel more nauseous than the corpse had and he pursed his lips in distaste. “The Ripper wanted it found quickly. He dropped the body off in broad daylight and made sure it would come to our notice.”

“That’s different to how he usually operates. The Ripper always plans his kills,” Jack replied, hands stuffed into his pockets. “Are we sure it’s him and not a copycat?”

Will almost laughed, but he caught himself and it came out more as a choked splutter. “Ah, he— uh, yes,” he said, clearing his throat. “It’s definitely him. I mean, look at the leg amputation. This was premeditated just like the others, but the execution was done quickly.”

Jack met his eyes, some of the bitterness from their previous conflict softened by the new scene. “Why the change in behaviour?”

Why indeed?

Will frowned slightly as he watched the crime scene investigators continue their cataloguing of the evidence, picking through the gravestones and grass looking for clues that wouldn't be there.

"Maybe it's to remind us that while he has his habits and patterns, he doesn't have to follow them. He usually operates at night, but here he is, killing and dropping a body with the sun high in the sky. He usually plans meticulously, but here is something raw and passionate. Maybe he's mocking us just before he disappears again for god knows how long." Will wasn't sure he fully believed what he was saying.

Perhaps the Ripper was mocking the FBI, but he didn't think that sentiment extended to him.

Jack let out a low hiss. "Could he have left evidence this time?" he asked. "Maybe he got sloppy."

They both knew that wouldn't be the case. The Chesapeake Ripper was never *sloppy*. This case would grow cold just as quickly as the body would and they would be left no closer to solving the case.

"Maybe, Jack," Will placated. "Maybe."

It was decided that with the sounder over and done with, the threat of Will dying to the Ripper's hands wasn't immediate enough to warrant protective custody. It was a relief and Will was on the phone to update the dog sitter before he even left the cemetery.

On the way out, he spotted a head of red curls by the entrance and immediately felt his stomach turn. The parking lot brought him directly into the line of fire and he braced himself for what he knew was coming.

"Good afternoon, special agent Graham," Freddie Lounds greeted with a demure smile from across the police tape. There was a click and the camera flashed suddenly, temporarily leaving Will blind.

Will looked around at the police cordon to see if anyone would intervene, but when they didn't, he pushed up his glasses and glared in the woman's direction. "Miss Lounds, I wasn't aware that you had permission to be here," he almost spat.

Her smile only broadened and she tipped her head to one side in a rain of red curls. "It's a free country and as far as I'm aware, there's only an issue if I cross the tape. This is public property, isn't it?"

He grit his teeth. "You just took a photo of me."

Turning her camera around, Lounds gleefully showed him said photos. Will looked like a mess, a glaring, sweaty mess. "I have my rights. As long as I don't hinder the investigation, you have no way to get rid of me. Anyway, why not give me a smile? Everyone loves a handsome antihero."

Will did not smile.

The camera flashed again, leaving white dots dancing across his vision.

“Will you stop that?!” he snapped, raising a hand.

“Having a bad day, Mr Graham?” she asked. “No more flowers from your secret admirer then? The last ones really were beautiful. It's almost a shame they were stuffed into a corpse.”

His stomach dropped, ice cold fear running through his veins. “How the hell did you find out about that?”

Her eyes narrowed, thin slithers of cruel mirth. “It's quite difficult to keep something secret when you have people yelling about it out in the open air. Anyone could, say... walk past and accidently hear something dreadful.”

Fingers itching to break or squeeze, Will averted his eyes from the woman's thin neck.

Rude, the Ripper whispered from the depths of his mind.

“Was it nice receiving flowers? I imagine you don’t get them often. Sweet William. Has anyone ever called you sweet before?” Lounds continued, standing across from him as if in challenge.

Yes, it’d been nice. No, no one had ever called him *sweet*.

“Miss Lounds, you are being incredibly inappropriate,” was what he said instead of the truth.

Like a hound that had caught the scent of blood on the air, her pale eyes gleamed as a knife under streetlights. “Mr Graham, do you think your involvement in the Chesapeake Ripper case is *appropriate* now the Ripper has shown personal interest in you? Do you fear for your life, or is his interest perhaps less murderous this time? Do you think that perhaps the Ripper sees something in you that he *likes*?”

It felt like trying to breathe through a strangle hold, clawed hands reaching down his throat. He could feel the soft brush of raven feathers under his hands, hear the stag breathing as if it was his own. Antlers grew in the corner of his eyes.

It wasn’t real.

It *wasn’t* real.

“No comment.”

“Oh, come now,” she said with a mocking pout. “Don’t be like that. Maybe the two of you have something in common.”

“Goodbye, Miss Lounds,” he spat, turning his back on the journalist and stalking away towards freedom.

The entire time she called after him, her camera clicking and whirring with each step he took.

His teeth ached with a desire he was too afraid to name.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for tuning in! I've finally got a plot forming up for this story, so I promise there will be many future hijinks for these two. Do let me know what you thought!

In Which a Monster Begins to Change

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Something is playing on your mind, Alana," Hannibal observed as he added the finishing garnishes to the starters, a dozen plates spread out across the counters as his sous chefs moved silently behind him.

She drew her eyes away from her beer for a moment, her lips pinched into a sad smile. "I've backed myself into something of a dead-end and I'm now paying the price for it. Turns out mixing friendship and professional duty is a bad idea," she admitted. Alana had a tendency to fiddle with her hair when anxious and she stood by the kitchen island, threading a long strand of it between her fingers.

Hannibal had always been fairly successful at utilising psychiatry in less than professional ways, but he supposed not everyone had the tact for it.

"I take it you have overstepped a boundary then? Something left irreparably changed by your actions?" he pressed.

Pain crossed her features and she nodded once, taking a hearty gulp of her drink. "Someone I wanted as a friend needed me more as a psychiatrist, so I did my duty to care for him. It was...bad and I know he feels deeply betrayed by what I had to do to him for his own sake. Now he's in danger, but our relationship is too damaged for him to ever fully trust in me again. I hate feeling so... powerless."

"You are grieving in a sense," Hannibal said, taking up a bowl of sauce and delicately drizzling it on each plate with a careful hand. "While your once friend is not dead, the closeness you had, is. Why do you think he feels so betrayed?"

She continued to fiddle, eyelashes fluttering as she battled against her instinct to retain strict patient confidentiality. "In vague terms, he was a danger to himself and others. Some of the things he said were... alarming and he only got worse with time. In the end I felt it was necessary he receive inpatient treatment. They had to keep him restrained. He has always been so dreadfully afraid of people analysing his mind, always independent to a fault, and he's terrified of imprisonment, but... I forced him to experience both first hand."

"And now any closeness you previously had is gone?" he finished.

Eyes cast down, she nodded. "He won't even look at me anymore. When he talks to me, I can tell that he wants to get as far away from me as he possibly can. It... hurts." Her voice cracked ever so slightly.

Hannibal contemplated that, mentally crossing off prison from his list of future schemes.

While Will Graham was a threat to his continued freedom and would need to neutralised somehow, the thought of losing his beautifully blossoming trust tasted too bitter on his tongue to risk. If he'd already been alienated from his previous support network, it would only make it easier for Hannibal to replace them.

"You did what you thought was best," he said, leaning over to squeeze her hand. Her pupil's dilated slightly at the touch, pink lips parted. "All you can do is learn from this experience. Your friend is going through a time of great stress, and if you are another source of that stress, it might be healthy for both you and him to have some space. Help him from a distance, if you can. Don't push his boundaries."

"I suppose," she murmured, shifting her weight. "I just, I worry about him a great deal."

"Perhaps you should consider using an intermediate, someone to provide separation, but able to assuage your concerns for him?"

Red rimmed eyes watched him carefully in consideration and Hannibal was happy in the knowledge that the seeds were taking root. "Yes," she whispered. "Yes, that could work."

"There may be hope, Alana, but new bonds can't be forged while still standing in the rubble of the old one."

She swallowed and nodded tearfully. Hannibal offered her a tissue and continued working in among his hired help.

"You're right," she murmured once she'd regained her composure. Thankfully she put the soiled tissue in the trash. "You're always a great help, Hannibal. Maybe I should've asked for your advice sooner."

"I haven't yet found a way to reverse time. There's no point of lingering on past possibilities, only seizing the present."

Hannibal fully intended to seize this opportunity presented to him.

The doorbell echoed through the house, so Hannibal straightened his shoulders and wiped his hands clean.

"Ah, I believe the other guests have arrived. And just in time."

The guest list for his dinners was always a matter of contention within high society. It was an honour to dine at his table, one that he knew would be discussed within their social circles for many months to come. Apart from him, no one knew quite how he selected his guest list of those that would receive one of his treasured invites, each hand written with perfect calligraphy.

The truth was a simple one. He chose his guests for the entertainment value they offered.

Alana Bloom was always pleasant company, intelligent and well mannered enough to not cause trouble.

The Komedas were also frequent invitees. Evelyn Komeda for her love of any conversation edging the line between gore and gossip, and her husband, Henry, for his excellent wine tasting pallet.

The Blitwicks had made the list this year, not because the couple were especially intelligent or interesting per say, but rather because Hannibal knew for a fact that Caroline Blitwick had had an affair with one of the servers he'd hired and he thought the image of the woman sweating and fidgeting in shame would make a rather pleasant accompaniment to the Entrées.

For the sake of his ego, he'd invited a number of sycophants along. Their names were inconsequential in comparison to the value of their enamoured squealing. After all, it was nice to be appreciated for his craft, even if the truth of his meat supply was still a guarded secret.

Just for the fun of it, he'd also invited Frederick Chilton, the bumbling fool that ran the BSHCI. Hannibal had met Doctor Chilton once or twice previously and had found him to be a delightfully pathetic specimen, lacking in character, charm and worth as an individual. He was a man always looking to impress others and flaunt his meagre accomplishments, so Hannibal greatly anticipated watching him fumble for attention at his table, a pig fighting for scraps.

Everything went to plan.

Drinks were served in the lounge to the tune of Handel and Chopin and then the party moved to the dining room to begin eating.

Hannibal introduced the food with his usual finesse, "and, I can assure you, that nothing here is vegetarian," to clamouring cheers and delighted laughter, and he watched with oddly muted delight as they began to eat.

Prosciutto made from the calf of Marcus Ortega.

Sausage from Joseph Graves.

Delicately smoked kidney from Jasmine Partridge.

Each morsel was readily consumed with greedy sips of precisely paired wines. And even Caroline's Blitwick's barely concealed dismay only added to the perfection of the evening's aesthetic appeal.

It was during the desserts when Mr Langshaw turned to Frederick. "So, Doctor Chilton, what is it exactly that you do?"

And like a starving man, Frederick grasped the opportunity to talk about himself with both hands. "Ah, a little of everything, I suppose. I was a consultant for the FBI a few years ago, I've written a number of critically acclaimed books and I'm presently the Head Administrator at the BSHCI," he proclaimed, around a bite of parfait infused with the plasma from Miss Partridge's blood.

“The BSHCI, “ Mrs Komeda said, her eyes wide with delight. “Isn’t that where they keep serial killers?”

Frederick thrummed with excitement and neatened his plumage as he adjusted his waistcoat. “You’re right, of course. The Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane keeps some of the most dangerous individuals alive safely behind bars. Why, this month, we’re expecting a fascinating new addition to our collection.”

“Anyone we’d know?” Miss Specklebury, one of opera board members asked.

Alana glanced across at Hannibal, her brows furrowed into a tight frown as Frederick let out a grating laugh.

“Well, well, are any of you familiar with the mushroom man by chance?”

There was a series of delighted exclamations. “That awful man who grew a garden using people,” Mrs Komeda was the first to pipe up.

“The very same one!” Frederick said, smiling rather like a cat that’d filled it’s belly with cream and hadn’t yet realised it was spoiled. “His derangement is unique and yet his ordered behaviour betrays a degree of psychopathic cruelty rarely observed in living specimens.”

The audience continued to crow and ask for more, but their fun was cut short.

Alana placed down her fork with a loud clatter and there was a quiet fury to the set of her chin. “Frederick, those *people* are your patients, not an entertainment spectacle,” she hissed. “You run a hospital, not a freak show.”

And with her proclamation, the table hushed, as if a line of candles had been extinguished in one fell swoop. There was nothing quite so damningly uncomfortable as the sudden exposure of one's own inhumanity, after all. Frederick’s eyes widened as a blustering incredulity left his cheeks stained red and usually Hannibal would’ve delighted in the humiliation of it all, but he instead found himself rather bored with the display.

“Now, Doctor Bloom, see here,” Frederick began, but Hannibal cleared his throat to cut him short.

“Perhaps we should retire this line of conservation,” he suggested with a smile that was entirely fictitious. “We shouldn’t discuss such morbid things over dinner.”

And that was the end of that.

Hannibal was diligent as he removed the creases from his suit, tucking it back into the safety of a garment cover. He would deliver it to the dry cleaners another day, but for now he hung it away in his cupboard, separated from the rest. The matching tie and pocket square were

folded and placed within the correct space in his dedicated, colour-coded tie drawer, while his sock garters were slid into a partition beside his underwear.

Skin still damp from a shower, he dressed in silk pyjamas and switched on the bedside lamp. It cast his bedroom in a warm yellow light, the shadows long and sharp like teeth.

As he perched on the edge of his bed, he was disturbed to find himself feeling... blank.

A rare, true scowl bit at his lips.

“Peculiar,” he whispered to himself.

There had always been a lingering satisfaction at the end of a sounder, the triumph of another dinner party successful thrown, the authorities left just as clueless as before. He always took glee in the performance of feeding the pigs beautifully crafted meals made from their own kind and he relished how they would simper and gush with each bite they took.

Yet here he was, a distinct sense of nothingness lingering in his stomach, almost as if he hadn’t eaten at all.

His appetite was left unsated, wanting.

The dinner had been perfect, on paper. The courses were delectable, the table a work of art in its own right. There had been the perfect mixture of beauty and horror, the ideal hint of discord to the otherwise inane chatter. Seeds had been sown, pigs had been feasted on, and yet, and yet. And yet.

He wasn’t satisfied.

He’d seen it before in others, this unravelling of serial killers, the escalation of their drives. It pushed them to further and further extremes, to chase the thrill of death, to balance on the precarious cliff of notoriety for the final taste of adrenaline.

It rarely ended well.

Most would be caught or killed, and their burgeoning hunger was their final undoing.

Hannibal did not intend to follow that path.

He laid down in bed, the covers pulled up to his chest, head resting atop his pillow. A half read copy of Brontë sat waiting for him to return to, but his mind was too alive with speculation and churning confusion for that.

Why?

Why the hollow ring to the conclusion of his favourite game?

Everything had gone to plan. Nothing had fallen outside of his expectations, nothing to upset the balance. But his tongue tasted of ash, his throat left dry.

And...

Ah.

“Why eat with pigs when an equal is better company,” he said, closing his eyes to blind himself from the stark light of truth.

How humiliating.

Hannibal reached for his book, but instead his fingers took up his phone. He held it there for several minutes, staring into the black screen, questioning why he sought it out, why a crackle of desperation weighed under his skin.

Hannibal [00:12]: Good evening, Will. I do hope I’m not messaging you too late.

He didn’t move, he barely even breathed as he watched the still text conversation, waiting.

Will [00:15]: It's a good night if I get to sleep before 3am, Doctor, don’t worry. Everything alright?

Hannibal smiled at the message, catching himself in the act and pausing to analyse the reaction.

Elevated heart rate.

A rush of endorphins.

Hannibal [00:17]: Well, I'm now somewhat riddled with concerns for your sleep schedule. Other than that, I find myself a little out of sorts tonight. Restlessness is rare for me.

The message felt too much like showing his soft underside, but despite his desire to delete the message, he was forced to accept that what was done, was done.

Will [00:20]: Do you want to call? You know, like the other day? I’m working on some marking, so I could talk at the same time. But, if you don’t want to, no worries. It was just a thought.

Hannibal hit call without bothering to reply and it rung several times before Will picked up.

“Will, four hours of sleep is not nearly enough for a man of your age,” Hannibal said. “You should be aiming for at least seven.”

There was a shuffling noise from the other end. “*Yeah, yeah, I know.*”

The sound of Will's voice felt so sweet in his chest, like the stab of a swift needle.

“Are you well?” he asked.

The question was inane, vapid and wane in comparison to the depth of Hannibal’s hunger for knowledge. There were a thousand things he wanted to ask this man. He wanted to know and

understand every minute detail of his life, from the sound of his sleeping breaths to the colour of his eyes when contrasted beside freshly spilled blood. He wanted to know his past, his present. He wanted to mould his future.

"*Well, I'm currently grading my students' essays. So, erm, I'm trying to decide between opening up my whiskey bottle or shoving a pen into my eye*," came the sardonic reply.

"You're a teacher?" Hannibal asked.

There was a soft sigh. "*Technically speaking, yes. Although you wouldn't think it with how often my classes get interrupted or cancelled these days. I teach the best and brightest the FBI have to offer, but they still apparently don't seem to understand that while victim identification based off of dental records is a well regarded, evidence based method, utilising bite-mark patterns from skin to identify the perpetrator is... uh, spurious at best. It's almost like they don't listen to me."*

The sound of his anger was divine catharsis in comparison to the grating niceties of his dinner guests. Genuine and deep, the full tone of his voice was muffled by the limitations of the technology between them.

"We can only hope that they'll learn their lesson before they receive their badges," Hannibal remarked.

Will made a noise with his teeth. "*Here's to hoping*," he muttered before taking a sip from an unseen drink. Glassware clinked softly.

"Ah, was that the whiskey you mentioned?"

"*Indeed it is. My eyes will remain intact for another day*."

Hannibal smiled to himself. "And the world remains a better place for it."

The profiler snorted and the pen scratching began again. "*Anyway, enough of my woes. What's stopping the esteemed Doctor Hannibal Lecter from getting a good night's rest?"*

"I attended a social function this evening and it left me out of sorts. It's unusual for me," he explained vaguely.

"*Social events, how fun,*" Will groused, before sighing. "*How was the company?"*

"Mediocre, but that's the norm for this sort of dinner. I can't identify any single element of the interactions or setting that was out of place, only my reaction to it." He disliked baring himself this way, but Will was an addiction he hadn't yet found the resolve to free himself from.

"*Then perhaps you're the cause*," Will said. "*People are fluid things. Priorities shift, interests change, and your likes and dislikes can reflect that. Maybe you've outgrown the events that previously satisfied you*."

Hannibal swallowed, his fingers flexing against the casing of his phone.

No.

No, he didn't like that.

"Perhaps," he answered. There was a stiffness to the way he spoke that made him grimace to himself, an unseemly slip to his otherwise perfect mask.

"*It's not a bad thing. Maybe you just need to consider what does satisfy you now*," Will continued gently.

Will Graham.

That was what satisfied him.

But that knowledge was no comfort. What farmer had compassion for the cow they sought to raise to the slaughter? What hunter drinks wine with the deer they wish to mount on their wall? What fisherman desires the company of the fish they intend to fry?

"I suppose I have grown too entrenched in my habits," Hannibal finally replied. "Maybe I am in need of some introspection."

"*Yeah, well, I could be wrong. I'm not exactly the best conversation partner for this sort of thing,*" Will said weakly, papers shuffling. "*Don't you have anyone else to discuss this with? It's not my forte."*

Hannibal stretched out in bed, holding the phone to his ear as he got comfortable again and deliberately relaxed the suddenly taut muscles. While he kept fit, the hours of cooking and preparation in the kitchen weren't doing him any favours. It was good to luxuriate after a long day. "Is it so strange of me to find your company preferable?"

"*Yes*," he stated. "*People don't deliberately seek me out unless they have to, generally speaking.*"

"I find people seek me out, but their company is often lacklustre," Hannibal murmured, staring up at the ceiling. He had entertained a room full of people, the place loud with chatter, and yet he'd felt utterly alone. It was only with this phone pressed up to his ear that the sensation eased. "I have always been quite particular in that regard."

"*Hmm, maybe you should take a leaf out of my book and be more of an asshole. Eventually people stop bothering you if you're foul enough*."

Hannibal huffed under his breath. "Will, that would be *rude*."

"*A little rudeness here and there does wonders*," came the pleased reply. "*Well, until they realise that your usefulness outweighs the unpleasantries, and then they decide to just put up with you."*

Hannibal inspected that statement with a slight furrow to his brow as he gazed up at the ceiling. "You feel as if the people in your life see you as a tool," he stated.

There was a dismissive noise and the shifting of paper. "*It's not about feeling, it's knowing. I am in possession of a mind marred with a unique cocktail of disorders that makes me the perfect glass cannon to take down the monsters*."

"You sacrifice yourself and your wellbeing for the benefit of others."

"*For the* good *of others,*" Will corrected, almost harshly. "*My work saves lives and I'm the only one that can do it.*"

He really had dug himself deep into that pit of righteous self-sacrifice. It would certainly take some work to have the man realise his own worth, but Hannibal had always enjoyed a challenge.

"I imagine you're very good at it, but your work is by no means unique. Criminals were caught before you and they will continue to be caught even once your superiors have ground out the last of your usefulness and left you languishing in the dust. Do you enjoy it at least?"

There was quiet for some time before he heard a small shaking breath. "*Enjoyment isn't the word I associate with work. I... tolerate it, endure it, but I get results and I suppose there's at least satisfaction in that*."

"Satisfaction in the final taste of blood. However, it's less enjoyable when your nose is pressed to the ground as you search for the scent trail, is it not?"

There was a short scoff. "*Yeah, you can say that again.*"

"Regardless, Will, you do deserve people in your life who value you for who you are, not what you can offer them. Your worth in a relationship should not be determined by how productive you are. You're a person, not a tool."

And for once, he meant it.

Hannibal saw most people as a certain type of cog or mechanism in the machine of fate, things that could be turned and fiddled with to set the motions of time in his favour. Will wasn't the same. He could certainly be poked and prodded, no doubt, but the warmth of his existence could be felt even at this distance, so different to the cold indifference he held for the mechanical parts he called men.

"*Do others see you as a person, or are you an entertainment spectacle?"* Will returned bitterly. Avoidance was the best way to protect yourself from uncomfortable truths.

"Friends are uncommon ground for me, I'll admit," Hannibal said. He wondered if it was wise to reveal so much of himself to the one man that could undo him entirely, but it felt right to do so. "I have few of them, so perhaps I am just a spectacle."

The profiler was quiet for a time and he heard the soft sigh of dwindling antagonism.

"*Somehow that surprises me less than it should*," the man spoke. "*You have an air of undeniable charisma. Most would be surprised to know that you're lonely, wouldn't they?"* Will's words cut deeper than any scalpel could reach, something more akin to a hunting knife.

Hannibal had never considered himself lonely before, until that moment, all alone in this wide bed of his, this silent house. His only comfort was the phone he had cradled close.

Yes... he was lonely, wasn't he?

"Your ability to read people continues to astound me, Will."

The man laughed, his pen scratching against the page. "*If it's any comfort, you're harder to see than most. Things still slip through the cracks though. People see you as an exotic bird. They surround you and adore you for your feathers and song. They idolize you, but they don't love you, and you don't care about them either*."

Hannibal had never been compared to a bird before and he wasn't certain if he was offended or not. "What animal are you, in this analogy?" he asked.

Will hummed for a moment and Hannibal could visualise the pleasing curve of his lips illuminated in fire light. "*I believe I'm the raccoon in the back alley. People worry that they'll catch rabies from me if they get too close*."

"Loners of opposing nature, but alone nonetheless. Do you believe the raccoon could befriend the song bird?"

He listened for the reply intently, not sure why he felt so invested in the answer. "*The bird has done a good job of luring the raccoon out with food. I think they, uh, they could be friends. They have more in common than first thought.*"

Hannibal really hoped that was true. He recognised the creature buried beneath Will's thin exterior of compulsory humanity, he only hoped to uncover it unmarred.

"I'd be honoured to be your friend, Will."

The phone line went quiet and Hannibal listened to the faint crackle of static. If he concentrated, he could hear Will's soft breathing and the sound of him swallowing. "*The, er, the sentiment is mutual.*"

Hannibal turned the lock pick with a click and the door finally opened. He kept a hand in place to prevent the dogs from rushing out and he was greeted by seven furry faces and wagging tails.

"Good morning, my dears," he said, coaxing them backwards so he could fully step inside and close the door behind him. It wouldn't do to have the dogs escape while Will was at work. "Could you all be good and sit for me?"

Will had trained his dogs well and the majority of them (apart from the Jack Russell who was too busy pawing at Hannibal's leg) sat politely. Reaching into his pocket, Hannibal pulled out

a paper bag of homemade dog treats and he individually complimented each animal on their politeness as he fed them.

“Hello, Maximillian,” he said, arriving at Max, petting the large dog's ears and listening to the thudding of his tail against the floor. “Such a polite boy. Mr Ortega could have learnt an important lesson or two from you.”

Max happily ate the treat containing what was left of Mr Ortega and Hannibal put away the rest of the treats for later. It would be discourteous to overfeed Will's pack in his absence.

He began his inspection of the place by visiting all the parts he hadn’t yet explored, namely, the upstairs, and he was a little disappointed to find several dusty rooms that looked barely touched. One was clearly an attempt at a guest bedroom, but the fine layer of disuse coating everything made Hannibal suspect that it’d never been utilised as one. The other seemed to be a storage room, filled with old furniture, boxes of paper and damaged mechanical parts. The only room of interest was the bathroom, but judging from the assortment of flea treatments, deworming medicines and muddy towels strewn about, he drew the conclusion that it was reserved for the dogs.

Back downstairs, a peer into Will’s chest of drawers revealed a frankly unseemly amount of flannel. His sock drawer was disorganised and if Hannibal hadn’t been trying to conceal his presence he would’ve gone through and paired them. Instead, he forced himself to push it closed and move on.

Next he turned his attention to where the bed resided and perched on the edge of the mattress.

Winston hopped up beside him and Hannibal glanced at him. “Are you meant to be up here?” he asked with a tilt to his head.

The dog watched him with dark eyes that held a surprising degree of shrewd intellect. He appeared almost bemused by Hannibal's presence there, as if to say, ‘are *you*?’

Hannibal couldn’t argue with that.

He let the dog be and continued his exploration of the bedside cabinet. The top was covered in mugs, each stained with dried dregs of coffee. In among them was a half empty bottle of high dose aspirin, a book on forensic entomology, and a knife that was clearly intended for gutting fish.

“Would work for a pig as well,” he said, holding the blade up to the light. It was well loved judging from the wear of the handle, but the blade itself was sharp and gleaming.

He set it back with a nod of approval.

In the first drawer he found the usual. Lotion, tissues, and an assortment of various knickknacks. There was a rather nice vintage timepiece with a stuck hand, a small wad of cash squirreled away right at the back and even what appeared to be a collection of feathers and animal bones inside a cleaned out pasta sauce jar.

In the bottom compartment he found a pile of folded towels, possibly four or five high. While not a suspicious discovery, it was a little unusual. One towel, he could understand, but five seemed excessive.

He looked at Winston. “Any clues?” he asked the dog.

The canine didn’t reply, but the fur he was shedding on the otherwise completely clean bedsheets gave Hannibal a suspicion. Leaning down, Hannibal pressed his nose to the fabric and took a long, deep breath. The smell of fresh sweat was strong, almost heady mingled with fresh notes of detergent and it was evident that Will had slept poorly last night.

That explained the towels. Likely a regular issue then.

Rather than sit up straight, Hannibal pulled over one of the pillows and held it against his face, burying his nose into the duck down. What he found was more of Will’s scent, this time mixed with what he unfortunately suspected was 3 in 1 shower gel. One day he would introduce the man to products that would better complement his natural odour.

(Later inspection would reveal that, in fact, it *wasn’t* 3 in 1 shower gel, but actually dog shampoo. The profiler clearly hadn’t seen the point in buying an extra bottle of toiletries, so had been subjecting himself to the same chemicals as his pack of hounds. The very thought of it left Hannibal vaguely nauseous and he had half a mind to force several bottles of his own personal hygiene products onto the man the next time they saw one another.)

Finally he stood and neatened the sheets to remove the evidence of his activities.

“Winston,” he said to the watchful canine. “Your father is my friend.” The word felt new and strange on his tongue, despite having said it many times before. Perhaps it was because he now understood it, finally knew the true weight and feel of it. “And, I’ve decided to keep him.”

Will Graham was a danger and a threat, but the taste of his budding darkness was too exquisite to have locked away and forcibly suppressed behind iron bars. If Hannibal was to survive him, he would need to change him.

And Hannibal was always happy to help someone along in their becoming. He just needed to find Will suitable prey.

He left the bed once he’d had his fill and after another wander of through the rooms, he went to Will’s work table, where several manila folders were laid out in the open for his perusal.

Flicking through the pages, he found the one about the serial hangings and picked it up.

Hannibal reread the file, familiarizing himself with the broad strokes and details of the case once again. Six bodies, each found in a different medical facility specialising in geriatric care. Two male victims, four female, all Caucasian and all above the age of seventy.

Will’s notes were tucked towards the back, and while they were mostly incomprehensible, Hannibal deciphered enough to get the jist of the man’s insights.

Killers often hunt in their own ethic group, so the perpetrator was mostly likely white. The killer showed a moderate understanding of pharmaceuticals, indicating at least a degree level education. He had estimated an age range of between twenty-five and thirty-five, most likely nondescript in appearance and small enough to not pose a physical threat on first impression. Enough organisation ability to plan each death weeks, if not months in advance.

Hannibal noted down the date of each murder, the location and the contact details for each facility.

It would be simple enough to find this illusive reaper.

Once content with his snooping, he took a pressing of one of Will's spare house keys. It was would make it easier for future excursions if he had a copy of his own and he suspected Will would be observant enough to notice if a spare were to go missing.

Then he left the house as he found it, leaving no trace of his perusal behind.

From the boot of his car, he took out a cooler and walked it up onto the house's veranda, the wood whining. He set the box under the shelter of the roof to protect it from the sun. The air was cold so he wasn't too concerned about the contents within going bad.

On the lid, he wrote out a small note on a square of paper.

Dear Will,

There was surplus food left over from a recent event that I held, so I hope I'm not being presumptuous in giving you these. Storage and cooking instructions are contained within and do let me know if you find them to your tastes. I understand that you're a busy man presently, so may these make your days slightly easier.

My regards,

Hannibal

Later that day as Hannibal finished updating his patient notes, his phone vibrated. Setting his pen down, he fished out the device, glancing at the notification on screen.

Will [18:23]: Hi, Doctor Lecter. I found the food you left me. It was unnecessary, but I appreciate the gesture. I like the little meat flower things.

Bedelia sat across from him, a wine glass ready in hand and knees crossed beneath a creaseless white skirt. Her hair was, as always, pristinely coiffed and free of imperfections. Stark light flooded the room from one side, while the other was darkened and embellished with vases of belladona, oleander and aconite.

A queen of poison and ice.

“I’ve made a friend,” he said, resting his hands on his lap.

Her face was unmoving at the proclamation, but her eyes shifted upwards, inspecting yet not quite meeting his own gaze. “Congratulations are in order,” she said, raising her glass perhaps an inch. “I find this news surprising. You have not referred to ever having had a friend, not once the entire time I have known you.”

“He is special,” Hannibal replied.

She regarded him coolly, her silence a subtle request for him to continue.

“This is the first time I have felt such a... drive to grow close to another. It is an oddity.”

“What about him incites your attentions, do you think?” She took a sip of her drink as Hannibal formed a response.

“He is both remarkable and yet wholly blind to his own value. An equal, but unfinished and requiring assistance to reach his own becoming.”

“Unfinished?”

“He allows himself to be constrained by the wants and desires of others, rejecting his own nature and compromising himself for their benefit.”

“Hannibal,” she murmured, tilting her head slightly to one side. “Does his vulnerability excite you?”

He considered the question, turning it over as one would when inspecting an especially interesting rock. “I find his potential exciting, but his vulnerability useful. He is plagued with fear and I long to see him free of it, to see who he could be without the chains of his self administered prison.”

“And what then? You have an overwhelming need to control the world around you. How will you cope when there is someone able to deny you? Or will you replace his prison with another of your own making?”

The light caught her wine just right, a deep pool of congealed blood. “I haven't decided,” he answered.

Bedelia always put on a good show of detached distance, of cool aloofness and fearlessness. It was one of the things he liked most about her. The mask she wore, however, was not without its faults and he saw one then, in the slightly tightening of her jaw.

“You appreciate this man for his mind,” she said. It was a statement, not a question.

“I do.”

She pursed her lips and leant forward, a blade of sunlight striking her eyes and casting them in the colour of ice.

“In which case, I suggest perhaps not breaking it.”

Hannibal had already decided against completely unravelling Will and rebuilding him from the base up. While a tempting option, Hannibal didn’t trust his own abilities to forge something greater than what nature had already provided. Will was a rarity and his destruction would be unfortunate.

“You believe I intend to damage him?”

“I believe you *intend* to change him.”

Hannibal acquiesced that point with a mild mannered shrug. “Change does not have to be destructive.”

The clock was situated directly over Bedelia's shoulder, fully within Hannibal’s line of sight, a purposeful reminder that their time was limited and her patience for him only went so far.

Bedelia raised an eyebrow. “No, it doesn’t, however your specific brand of change usually is. You see this man as an equal. Have you perhaps considered that in trying to change him, he will change you in turn?”

For once, she managed to land the needle where she intended, but Hannibal was better than to reveal the twinge of pain she had successfully wrought. “I am often the force of change, not it’s subject.”

Raising her glass, she took a long drink and smiled at him across the rim. “And usually you find your relationships to be surface level matters of convenience, and yet this man is an exception, the *only* exception. If anyone in the world could change you, don’t you think it could be him?”

The pain intensified and Hannibal crossed his arms to feel the comforting solid shape of his scalpel against his muscle, ready and waiting to be drawn. “Perhaps,” he replied.

“It’s already begun, hasn’t it?” she continued slowly. “Hannibal, can’t you see that the change has already begun?”

She was right and Hannibal despised her for it in that moment.

The warmth of blood had scarcely been such a tempting vice and Hannibal found his eyes pinned to where he knew the carotid artery lay beneath the flesh of her delicate neck. It pulsed with the blood needed to keep her brain alive and it would be so easy to yank her head back by the hair and plunge his blade through the sternocleidomastoid muscle into the vessel below.

The crimson blood would stain her white clothes so beautifully, a reminder of the petty humanity she tried so diligently to hide.

But alas, he couldn’t allow himself the indulgence.

It would be inconvenient to find a new therapist as competent and as willing to bend their morality as Doctor Du Maurier was. He would have to allow this slight to slid, at least until there was a time for a suitable reckoning.

Hannibal stood up and to his delight, Bedelia flinched enough for some of her wine to trickle down her wrist. Taking time to straighten his sleeves and button up his blazer, Hannibal watched her steadily without looking away.

“I’ll see you next week, Doctor,” he finally spoke.

Her lips pursed into a thin line and she tilted her head forwards in assent. “Until then,” she replied.

Chapter End Notes

Hi folks! Updates are probably going to be slow for the next couple months (I'm finishing my master's thesis so I've got to do a Stammets and be one with the soil fungus for a while), but there's more ahead! Also, I'm sort of considering maybe uploading a podfic version if that's something people like???

As always, I love hearing your thoughts on the chapters!

In Which a Killer is Found

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was Wednesday morning.

The schedule laid out before him was blessedly empty until his one o'clock session with Franklyn Froideveux. That gave him plenty of time to enact the next stage of his plan.

Hannibal took out a burner phone from the locked desk drawer to his left, setting it beside the notes he'd copied down from his inspection of Will's home two days prior. He drew his thumb down the list of hanging locations, until he made up his mind and tapped a phone number twice with his index finger.

He dialled the selected number and listened with the phone pressed to his ear to the sound of the its ringing.

It connected after several chimes. "*Hello, ward G3 nurse's desk.*"

"Good morning, my dear," Hannibal greeted, leaning back in his chair to contemplate the shelves of his office and the broad canopy of the high ceiling. "I have a quick query that I was wondering if you could help me with."

"*Well, I can certainly try*," the woman on the line answered.

"I'm part of the clinical audit committee, you see," he said, twirling a pen between his fingers, "and I'm looking to follow up on the use of agency staff within the hospital. You wouldn't happen to know what agencies we typically use, or at least could you point me in the direction of someone who would know?"

She took a sharp draw of breath and hummed to herself. "*Agencies*," she repeated slowly. "*I'm not sure exactly who the contracts are with, but we've always had excellent experiences with short term staff in this department, even with the high turnover. Erm... just give me a moment would you?"*

"Of course, thank you." Hannibal patiently waited as he was put on hold, watching the slow movement of the clock's hand on the wall opposite.

After a minute or so, the line crackled back to life. "*Hello, sir, sorry about that. I have the extension number for the temporary staffing office, would you like me to put you through to them?"*

Hannibal smiled to himself. "Yes please. Thank you for your time."

The line soon began to ring again and this time it was picked up by a young man. Hannibal fed him the same lie as before and it went down just as smoothly. "I'm specifically looking into nursing staff, if that's any help," he added at the end.

"*Nursing agencies, nursing agencies,*" the man said to himself. "*Hey, Carol! What agencies are the travel nurses contracted with?"* he called over to someone that Hannibal presumed was a co-worker. There was a muffled exchanged before he continued. "*Okay, so I think for nurses, we mainly work with Voxwells, and occasionally MediallianceP*lus. *The rest are with internal contracts.*"

Hannibal noted down the names triumphantly. "Ah, you're an absolute lifesaver," he said, his lip twitching with amusement. "Thank you so much."

"*Yeah, no worries. B- bye*."

Cheerfully placing a tick beside the used number, Hannibal made quick work of finding the two staffing agency's customer service lines and placed an asterisk beside another of the facilities.

"*Hi, this is the customer service line for Voxwells staffing agency. How can I help you?"* came the overly saccharine, mechanical greeting.

"Hello, I'm calling from Tranquillity Care. I've recently taken over the staffing records for my site and I've noticed some clerical errors and gaps in our books. Would it be possible to find out if we've had held any contracts with your agency over the last year or two?" Hannibal asked easily, his eyes turning towards the ceiling as he heard the clicking of a keyboard.

"*Yes, sir, I believe I could help you with that. Do you have the customer reference number for your location?"*

For the sake of authenticity, Hannibal grimaced and let out a small sigh. "I'm afraid my predecessor has left me with quite a mess. I'm not even sure if the number is written anywhere."

There was a small sympathetic noise. "*Oh, not to worry. Do you have the zip code? I can do a manual search*."

He dragged his notes a little closer as he read out the numbers and letters.

For a while, all he could hear was breathing and the tell-tale clatter of keys.

Finally there was a happy noise. "*Ah, here we are*," they said. "*Tranquillity Care, Pottstown, Pennsylvania*."

"That's it," Hannibal replied.

"*So, it looks like you've had six temporary staff contracts through us in the past year. One of them is still currently active.*"

"Would you be alright to give me their last names, so I can compare them to my records?"

There was a brief pause and Hannibal waited patiently for the response. "*Oh, sure. I can read them out for you now, if you're ready.*"

“Thank you.”

Pen in hand, Hannibal sat upright.

“*The first was Castillo in January, Murphy in February, Lippman and Jones in April, Pohl in October, and then Brentman in November*.”

Hannibal finished writing, lifting the pen nib from the page. “Perfect, you have been a marvellous help,” he said.

“*Not to worry. Good luck with the records, sir*.”

Hannibal thanked them one last time and hung up.

He placed a tick beside Tranquillity Care and turned to scrutinise the list of names laid out before him.

A slash of his pen removed Brentman and Pohl. The contracts were too recent for his purposes.

Four remained.

He selected the most recent murder location and pressed the phone to his ear again.

“*Conifer elderly care, this is Emma speaking!*”

Hannibal smiled. “Good morning, Emma. I have a rather odd request to make of you. Are you familiar with the clinical staff members there?”

There was a long pause and the creak of a chair. “*Oh, erm, I guess so. We share a staff room.*”

“Excellent,” Hannibal said gently. “You see, I met a member of your staff a while ago and I can’t for the life of me remember her name. I believe she was a nurse.”

“*I’ll be honest with you, we actually have some issues keeping nurses on the team*,” Emma said dropping her voice in a conspiratorial whisper. “*Management work them to the bone*.”

Hannibal tutted under his breath. “My, that’s no good,” he agreed. “I think her last name was possibly Murphy or Jones, maybe Lippman? I’m none too sure.”

“*Uhm... I don’t know a Murphy and I know too many Joneses. Lippman, Lippman... Oh! Do you mean Catherine?*”

Hannibal picked up his pen again. “Ah, Catherine, yes that could’ve been it.”

“*She was just the sweetest thing,*” Emma continued to gush. “*You know, she used to bring around homemade cookies on Friday just to cheer us all up. I was so sad to see her leave, but the poor girl seemed burnt out by the end*.”

“*She very attentive to my memory*.”

There was a sigh. "*Yes, she was a joy to have around. If you speak to her, could you tell her that I say hi?"*

"Of course, thank you for your assistance, Emma."

After the usual exchange of social niceties, Hannibal was once again left alone in his study to bask in the thrill of success.

There she was.

Catherine Lippman.

He smiled to himself with the kind of contentment he imagined was similar to the sensation most people received when they completed a difficult crossword puzzle or Sudoku.

This killer of the old and infirm, who whispered people so sweetly to their deaths, was his to hunt.

He would find this siren, wind her up and watch her go.

His peace was sadly disturbed by the clatter of the door to the patient entrance and he knew the shuffling, bumbling sound of Franklyn's footsteps. He was twenty minutes early.

His face dropped in annoyance, the slithers of delight dissipating in the face of monotony's return. Resigning himself to an hour of the man's inane, clingy ramblings about his friend Tobias and the nauseating sycophantism directed towards him, Hannibal packed away his notebook and burner safely away from sight.

He would return to them when the opportunity presented itself.

It was simple enough to use an online background checker to find several Catherine Lippmans in and around the US, but with a glance at the case information, he was able to narrow it down to just one. Catherine Ruth Lippman of Millersville, Pennsylvania. The crime scenes all conveniently fell within a two hour drive radius of her last known address.

After that, he soon dug up her social media. Her Instagram account was private, but the profile photo of a smiling blonde woman standing in the forest was enough for him to memorise her defining characteristics. A slim face with a weak jaw. A slightly crooked nose from past trauma. Thin lips that could be pulled into a deceptively gentle smile. A smooth philtrum and light, mousy hair cut to just beneath her ears.

Everything about her appearance was unobtrusive. Unremarkable. She had the type of face seen and then almost immediately forgotten.

It was the perfect camouflage for a hunter.

Hannibal had pencilled himself a free day that Saturday, neatly pushing his social engagements into a more convenient arrangement for his needs. So, after a hearty breakfast and going about his morning routine of shaving, meal-prepping, ensuring Miriam Lass was fed and watered, and donning an immaculate grey suit, he set out for Pennsylvania.

Along the way, he switched to another of his cars, one registered under a different name and untraceable back to him. It was older, second hand and had seen enough miles to not turn heads.

He listened to opera as he drove.

Dido and Aeneas.

A tragedy of betrayed love and heartache.

Hannibal found himself more engrossed in the tale than he usually was, his attention so carefully and piercingly held at ransom by the chilling score that his driving was purely muscle memory.

He wasn't certain what truth he found in Dido's lament, in the heart clenching agony of her dying voice as she sought the lonely comfort of death at her lover's blade. Was Hannibal the man led to betrayal by false gods, or the woman left to languish in the misery of her broken heart?

Perhaps he was neither.

Perhaps he was both.

Perhaps he was both betrayer and betrayed.

He didn't know, but he listened with rapt attention nonetheless.

When he arrived, he drove past Lippman's property once and then twice, finding it to be set back from the road along an overgrown driveway cluttered with spindly weeds. The area was remote, the other houses over a hundred yards away and trees and thickets filled the space between. There were lights on inside and a car parked out the front, so he remained out of sight of the main windows and pulled up in among the cover of the trees nearby.

Stakeouts were a skill. They required patience and attentiveness that most didn't possess.

As he watched the dull normality of a life play out before him, he mentally entertained himself by planning out future tableau designs, picking out fabrics and flowers and comparing different lighting setups.

By about midday, he'd learnt that Lippman spent most of her time either laying on a couch or pacing back and forth. Through the binoculars he'd bought, he could make out the stressed lines to her body, the way she would flinch and mouth words to herself at the slightest noise.

As afternoon drifted closer, he tucked into a sandwich he'd packed for the occasion. The bread was still fresh and the filling was mostly leftovers from the night before, so it was a

pleasant highlight in amongst the otherwise fairly unproductive occasion.

And then, to his delight, he heard the front floor open and he watched as Lippman stepped outside for the first time that day.

She looked much as she had online, although her hair was slightly longer, the shadows under her eyes slightly deeper. To the casual observer, she would look small and weak, with her average height and slim build, but Hannibal recognised a certain wiry strength in her arms as she wrestled with a jammed car door. Nursing was a far more physically demanding profession that most thought and many of them likely spent a comparable amount of time lugging around bodies to Hannibal.

He waited five minutes after Lippman's car had left the premises to open the door and step outside. He didn't know how long she would be gone for, so Hannibal made quick work of investigating the property.

It was a bungalow, one story, five rooms with a back and front entrance. A spare key was hidden beneath a loose paving slab. What drew his curiosity was the array of tin cans out the back, all lined up on a makeshift table. Each bore the marks of mangled entry and exit holes and he found the discarded bullet casing littering the ground over 30 feet away.

She was a good shot, but the relative state of burial of the metal pieces suggested that days, perhaps weeks, passed between practices.

There were no signs of pets or other inhabitants and a peer through the window revealed a house in quiet disarray. It was sparsely furnished, the bookshelves empty apart from a small collection of reference books stacked in one corner. He could see a gathering pile of unwashed dishes in the sink, a sack of trash waiting by the back door, laundry heaped on an armchair.

All signs of an individual experiencing acute mental distress.

Not dallying for longer than necessary, he hid a small camera in an overgrown flowerbed and pointed it directly at the front door. A few leaves and stones made it almost impossible to spot unless you were actively looking for it. If all was in order, he would receive a notification every time Lippman entered or exited the premises.

Before he could test the setup, he heard the thrum of a car's engine, so he as quickly and as stealthily as he could, ducked out of sight behind a dilapidated shed. The roll of tyres crunched over gravel and he remained still and silent as a metallic door opened and closed. There was a jangle of keys and the click of a lock as Lippman returned home.

In his pocket, his phone vibrated once and then twice.

Once he was sure he wouldn't be seen, he slunk his way back to the car and slipped into the front seat.

Taking out his phone, he checked his notification, only expecting one from the camera, but his heart did a strange stutter as he saw the name emblazoned across the screen. Camera

forgotten, he clicked on his conversation with Will Graham.

Will [15:31]: Hey, Doctor Lecter. I caught a couple trout today. It's a bit much for just me to get through by myself. I know you enjoy cooking, so would you like one?

Hannibal smiled, slightly caught off guard, brushing his finger over the profile photo he'd secretly taken of Will at their breakfast together. His hair was still damp from his shower in the image, his face free of his obstructive glasses.

Will had hunted for him and wanted to feed him in return. He hadn't expected the flare of pride and deepening obsession that bloomed beneath his ribs, the feelings so unfamiliar and strange. However, he wasn't one to lie to himself, so he accepted them as they were and basked in the knowledge that Will had killed for him.

It wasn't Hannibal's preferred prey, not yet, but there would be time for that.

Hannibal [15:43]: I would be honoured to be gifted one of your kills, Will. I have several excellent trout recipes at hand.

Will [15:45]: Cool, is there somewhere I could drop it off for you? I've still got the cooler you left at mine.

Hannibal [15:46]: If you're free this evening, you could visit my home and join me for dinner. You know how much I love to cook for an audience. It would be the perfect melding of our two passions.

Will [15:48]: Hmm, let me just check my extensive social calendar.

Will [15:49]: Wow! Would you believe that? I appear to be free tonight.

Hannibal stifled an amused huff, pressing his thumb over his lips.

Hannibal [15:51]: I'm honoured that you found the time to fit me into your busy schedule. I will send you my address. When should I expect you?

Will [15:53]: I currently stink of river and fish guts, so I'll need to shower and see to the dogs. I could be there for 6 or 7?

Hannibal almost would've preferred those natural scents over the pungent chemicals Will insisted on slathering over his body, but it wasn't yet his place to complain. Anyway, he would need at least a couple hours to drive back to Baltimore, change cars and arrive home in time to start the meal prep.

Hannibal [15:56]: 7 would be ideal. I shall see you then.

Will [15:58]: Yeah, see you then.

Sliding his phone away once he'd typed out his home address, Hannibal glanced back at Lippman's house through the trees. With her car now back in the driveway and movement flashing by the windows, Hannibal knew that his chances of having another opportunity to

get close were slim for today. If he wanted a better look, he would try another time once he'd learnt her patterns or visit again under the cover of darkness.

But for now, he had a dinner to prepare.

Will looked up at him from the bottom step of the porch for a moment, before the sharp gaze flickered away to take in his surroundings, the cooler clutched in his arms like a protective shield. His glasses dangled from his nose as he shifted from foot to foot, barely concealing the shadows of sleep deprivation bruising his under eyes.

“If I’d known you lived in a manor, I wouldn't have worn my work boots,” the man said in greeting. “And, I might've picked a sweater without holes in it.”

There were, indeed, several holes in the faded knit fabric, loose threads dangling along the hemlines.

Hannibal couldn’t help the smile that threatened to crack his usual facade. He allowed it just a little, indulging himself in the thrill of Will’s presence. “I believe it’s a mansion, technically speaking. I also don’t have a dress code for friends, so I’m happy to welcome you in whatever makes you comfortable.”

Will raised an eyebrow at him. “Your neighbours will be wondering why you're consorting with a shabby ne’er-do-well.”

Stepping aside and holding the heavy wooden door, Hannibal beckoned the man inside. “They’re welcome to speculate about my preference in companions to their heart's content. However, I refuse to deny myself the pleasure of your company on their account.”

Will gave one last sweeping glance to the front of Hannibal’s house before following him inside.

“Would like me to take that?” Hannibal asked, already reaching for the cooler.

“Oh, yes. Thanks.”

Relinquishing control of the barrier between them, Will shrugged off his jacket and hung it up on one of the spare hooks. He seemed momentarily lost and his eyes never seemed to settle in one place for long as he scrutinised the foyer. Finally, he pursed his lips and tapped his boots on the ground. “I probably shouldn’t wear my shoes inside,” he murmured.

“I don’t mind either way, but you’re welcome to leave them on the shoe rack,” Hannibal offered.

Escape was harder bare footed, after all.

Will had his shoes off in record time and Hannibal lead him through the house, catching a whiff of Will's unfortunate aftershave now up close. He'd clearly put some, if misguided, effort into his appearance before arriving.

Usually Hannibal enjoyed showing off his home to his guests, but Will was keenly perceptive to a degree he couldn't yet fully fathom, so the experience was somehow more intimate despite the lack of words shared between them. Would Will see something within the paintings that Hannibal didn't? Did the furniture whisper his secrets into Will's ears without his consent?

Finally they reached the kitchen and Hannibal welcomed Will inside. The smell of fresh ingredients already coloured the air.

"The inner sanctum," Will said, glancing around the room with a discerning focus.

"Yes, the beating heart of my home," Hannibal said, setting the cooler on the side and moving to wash his hands in the sink with the brisk practicality of a surgeon.

Will didn't approach the counters or the inner island. Instead he skirted the wall like a creature investigating new territory, eyes darting around the space and never lingering in one place for too long. "Your sanctuary is less embellished than the rest of your house. Clinical and functional, but made to suit your every whim. The other rooms are where you revel in the sublime, but here, *here* is where you make beauty."

"In the act of creation, I prefer a blank slate to begin with. Tell me, Will, do you relish creation?"

Eyes hidden by heavy lenses followed his every movement as Hannibal opened the cooler and pulled out the fish within. The trout was a good size, with excellent pigmentation, a metallic sheen to its scales and that distinctive speckle pattern spread across its sides. Will had brought it to him gutted, the incision smooth from head to tail in one steady cut, a sign of certainty and practise.

It was an exquisite gift.

"I guess," the profiler murmured, arms crossed as Hannibal selected a knife from the block and began slicing away thick fillets of the fresh meat. "I... well, I make my own fishing lures. Usually I collect things that I find on my walks and tie them myself. Does that count?"

That explained the crafting table and pots of random trinkets Hannibal had discovered during his rounds of Will's home.

"Of course. I take it one of your lures was used to catch our dinner tonight?"

The man's cheeks distorted into a slight smile as he nodded and glanced down at his socks. "Yes. It was, erm—I based it off of the Ruby Meadowhawk, *Sympetrum rubicundulum*. It's a dragonfly with this bright red hue. They look almost surreal when you see them up close, like tiny flying rubies. It was difficult finding thread that would do the colour justice."

“I’m not familiar with them,” Hannibal admitted, simultaneously divided between the discomfort of being confronted with an area of expertise he was blind to and the pleasure of witnessing Will’s undivided passion.

“We lived in Ohio for a bit when my old man worked on Lake Erie, and we’d see tons of them during summer. Sometimes the brave ones would land on you and you could watch them hunt in the fields nearby,” he explained, drawing out his phone and tapping at the screen for a few seconds. Will approached the island where Hannibal was at work, and turned the screen towards him.

Hannibal peered at the image, careful to not touch the device with his soiled hands and he found himself almost charmed by the small creature he saw. It really was as red as Will had mentioned, as vibrant as arterial blood spray. Its wings were delicate networks of pitch black spindles organised into organic lace, like the most intricate of lead lined windowpanes.

“What a wonderful creature,” he murmured.

Will stepped away, his excitement almost magnetic in that moment in the pale blue of his eyes and the white of his sharp teeth. “They really are. I don’t know if my lure did it the justice it deserved, but ah- well, clearly the fish thought so.”

Hannibal had a cast iron pan heating over the hob, herb infused butter already melting and sizzling against the heat. The fillets hissed and crackled as he carefully laid them side by side.

“Indeed. We will fill our bellies with the spoils of our mutual acts of creation,” he stated. “A suitable consummation of our friendship, I believe.”

A flush tinted Will’s pale cheeks, his expression a mixture of confusion and nervous joy. Instead of retreating back to his spot by the wall, he loitered closer to the island.

Hannibal spoke to him about the ingredients and recipe, showing him each spice and having him sniff each sauce and drizzle as Hannibal laid out their plates into a simple, yet elegant presentation. Rather than allow Hannibal to take their plates into the dining room, Will picked them up with careful calloused hands and nodded for Hannibal to lead the way.

It was strange.

There was a ritual to the way Hannibal usually dined with others. He would cook and perform and entertain. His audience were just that, a passive audience simply there to observe the proceedings, but Will had upset the balance, inserted himself into a role Hannibal hadn’t even been aware existed.

Hannibal had already set the table and he poured them both a glass of a delicate Sauvignon Blanc as Will placed down their plates. They took their seats opposite one another and Hannibal raised his glass.

“How about a toast?” he asked.

Fidgeting Will reached for his own glass and held it tight. “What to?”

“How about to new beginnings? It seems fitting.”

That seemed to relax him and the profiler sat up straight as he reached across the distance between them. “Yeah, sure. Why not? To new beginnings, then.”

The glasses clinked together, striking a singularly pure note in the dimly lit room.

Will took the first bite of their dinner and chewed it slowly with closed eyes.

“Huh,” Will said to himself, glancing up from his plate as he laid down his fork. “I feel like I’ve been mistreating my trout before this.”

“It’s quite a simple recipe if you prepare in advance,” Hannibal replied, internally preening.

Will opened his mouth and then closed it again. He frowned and bit his lip for a moment. “Do you think you could give me a copy?”

Hannibal paused as he cut into the tender meat, wetting his lips with his tongue. “If you remind me, I’ll send it to you,” he replied softly, sitting with the uncomfortable sense that Will was unknowingly pushing and testing his boundaries, only for him to relent each time.

The man murmured a thanks and continued eating with the gusto of someone that’d spent all day outside doing manual labour. Will hummed to himself happily as he dug into the fish for another bite, his foot tapping against the floor with a steady rhythm that Hannibal was certain the man didn’t even notice he was keeping.

"How old were you when you realised you were different?” Will asked. The question seemed to come out of left field, but Hannibal was growing accustomed to the man’s delightful unpredictability.

“Who’s to say that I believe I’m different?” Hannibal responded. “Perhaps I see myself as just another unremarkable man, with just another unremarkable life.”

Will stifled a snort as he chewed and swallowed, the upwards curve of his eyebrow almost coy. “Sure you do. Just another unremarkable man with Leda and the Swan in his dining room, presumably for the entertainment of watching his guest’s appalled reactions and relishing the power of knowing that they wouldn’t dare challenge him on it.”

So astute.

“Perhaps this unremarkable man simply has eclectic tastes,” Hannibal said to continue the game. “Unrequested comments on the decor of one’s home could be considered rather rude.”

Will's eyes narrowed with sharp amusement and he shifted forward in his seat a little to peer at Hannibal over the frame of his glasses. “Maybe from most,” he replied lightly, his knife taking another slice of the delicate fillet.

Hannibal allowed himself to share in Will’s mirth, his lips twitching upwards at the corners even as he looked down at his plate.

They continued eating in a companionable quiet, metal ware occasionally clicking against ceramic.

“I don’t believe there was a specific age,” Hannibal eventually admitted, spearing a tender stem of broccoli on fork tines. “There was no moment of realisation. It was simply innate knowledge that I’ve always possessed.”

“Yeah?” He could hear the colour of curiosity in the question.

“I didn’t believe I was human for the first few years of my life,” he continued. “I thought of myself as a creature abandoned to my family’s care as an observer of human behaviour.”

“What changed?”

Hannibal glanced up, finding blue eyes staring directly at him. It was with ease that he met Will’s uncommonly steady gaze.

“I broke a bone,” he said, momentarily placing down his knife to raise his right hand. He flexed the digits and pressed his thumb to the distal phalanges of his little finger. It was still a little crooked, even all these years later. “I was five when the doctor looked at it and declared me healed. To me, that proved that I was at least biologically human, so I reasoned to myself that if I had a human body, then maybe it was my mind that set me apart from others.”

Will grinned at him, resting his elbows on the table. “Young you wasn’t far off.”

“The logic was sound and stands to this day,” Hannibal agreed lightly. “I sometimes still struggle to understand myself as the same species as others. What about yourself?”

Will looked down momentarily, a small line forming between dark brows. “I didn’t realise at first,” he murmured. “We moved around a lot, so I, uh, didn’t really spend much time with other kids. It’s easy to rationalise why you feel alone when you’re surrounded by adults all the time.”

“However, I assume that eventually the truth came to light?”

“Yeah,” he replied, taking another bite and chewing it slowly. “I never went to kindergarten, so elementary school was my first time around children my age. I got there... and, God, I don’t think there was a day I didn’t come home and cry that entire first year. I remember feeling overwhelmed constantly, like there were ants in my brain anytime I sat in class. All those people, all those sounds, all those emotions.”

“A cacophony to a small child, no doubt.”

Will nodded, still looking away. “It was the 80s, so they took one look at me and decided I was just plain weird. No one understood that I was, uh, I was... in pain. My ol’ man later told me that my teacher used to call me thick and said I’d never go anywhere in life. Never went back to that school after that and the teacher was later in a car crash after his brakes failed.”

There was a weight to the way he spoke, a subtle suggestion of *why* the man’s brakes had failed.

Cut, perhaps?

Hannibal's estimation of Will's father improved somewhat in his mind.

"I can't say I feel much sympathy for him," Hannibal murmured.

Will let out a single laugh, teeth barred. "Yeah, me neither. By the time I was in middle school, I had school counsellors drooling all over me, trying to get into my head. Every time they pulled me out of class, there was a new diagnosis, a new test for me to fill out. I knew that they weren't interested in helping me, they just wanted to use me as a case study, another freak show exhibit. The other kids would sometimes try to talk to me at first, but then I'd say too much or too little or laugh at the wrong time and the next thing I knew, they would go back to avoiding me."

Hannibal hummed contemplatively. The man's aversion to psychiatrists made more and more sense with each passing titbit he learned. This was a man used to betrayal and damaged trust, his normalcy painted in rejection and superficial interest from others.

"Isolating," he murmured. "It must've been lonely."

Will pursed his lips into a firm line, picking at the fish for a moment in an act of distraction. "It was. But I eventually realised that I prefer it that way. I feel most... like myself when I'm alone."

"No mask to wear in your own company?" Hannibal suggested.

A single nod. "Yeah, and no other minds getting in the way of my own. Do you prefer being alone as well? An unremarkable man with a mansion of delights all to himself."

"Yes," was the easy response, but Hannibal paused for a moment to consider it again. He found that while the answer should've been an easy one, it wasn't quite so simple anymore. "Although, as of recent, I have found myself appreciating company more than I have prior."

Eyebrows raised, Will's answering smile was a wry one. "Again with the compliments."

"Hm, or perhaps it's simply honesty," Hannibal responded.

"Are you often honest, Doctor Lecter?" Will asked, dragging a fork full of vegetables through the sauce.

"To myself, always. To others, when the mood for it arises."

Will snorted and took his time chewing and swallowing. "Yeah. Yeah, fair enough," he said through his own amusement, fingers loosely dragging through his hair.

They continued to eat, both consumed by their own thoughts. The silence wasn't an uncomfortable one, instead it went by peacefully until their plates were empty.

"Could I tempt you to a nightcap before you leave?" Hannibal asked once he'd removed the dirty crockery from sight.

Will checked his watch and pulled a face. “Yeah, sure, why not. The dogs will be okay as long as I’m back before bedtime.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask how you’ve been since our last meeting,” Hannibal said as he pushed the drinks cabinet closed with his elbow, holding a glass in each hand. “I’ve been rather busy, so I’m afraid I’ve not been keeping terribly up to date with the news.”

Will had taken up residence on one of the study’s several armchairs. Curiously it was one that Hannibal rarely used himself, too far from the fire to feel its full warmth compared to his preferred seat.

“I’m sure you heard that the Ripper finished his sounder,” Will spoke, thanking Hannibal softly as he accepted the drink.

“Ah yes, I did hear that. Were there any other developments?” Hannibal replied as he sat down and stretched out his legs.

“Well, so far we’ve only got a positive ID on two of the victims,” Will admitted, sipping at the tumbler. “The John Doe from the Baltimore State Cemetery is still a mystery. No dental records, no recent missing persons reports, no DNA matches.”

Hannibal frowned somewhat, crossing his legs. It wasn’t surprising news. Mr Ortega had been chosen for his comparatively isolated lifestyle. Hannibal had been on a time limit to dispatch his next victim, so an ill mannered hermit living on a run down street with few curious neighbours had been ideal for his purposes.

“Is that an uncommon occurrence?” Hannibal asked.

Will shook his head. “God, no. John and Jane Does are about as common as pigeons. We see hundreds of them each year. But it’s frustrating not knowing, like a missing puzzle piece on an almost complete image. I work with the evidence I see, so there’s not much I can do if I have no evidence to go off.”

“What happens now?” Hannibal asked.

Will sighed. “Well, they’ll put out a request for information to see if anyone owns up to knowing the guy, but given how his face has already been splashed across the Internet, courtesy of Lounds, I’m not hopeful. The state of the body even before the killing indicated he was impoverished. His teeth showed signs of previous dental work, but also several missing teeth and a number of large untreated cavities, which suggests he fell on hard times at some point and hasn’t been back to the dentist since, likely explaining why we’re not getting a match on the records. Stomach contents showed he’d eaten toast for breakfast and was killed shortly afterwards.”

“Not a particularly pleasant start to the day, I’d imagine,” Hannibal commented.

That drew a small huff of mirth from his companion. “No, no, not particularly. We’re probably going to spend our time following dead ends for the foreseeable future, well, until the next nutjob comes out of the woodworks.”

“Is that preferable to field work, or no?”

Scowling down at his drink, Will swirled the golden liquid within. “Uh, it’s different. I’m a specialist in crime scene investigation, but I’ve worked homicide before. I’m familiar with how it goes. It’s dull and frustrating mostly. The Ripper hasn’t ever slipped, so its almost pointless spending hours tracking down all these fabric and jewellery suppliers just to find out that they take cash and don’t have CCTV.”

“Yes, that doesn’t sound all to interesting.”

“Exactly, but oh, no, apparently they still absolutely need a consultant around to read a years worth of speciality flower sale records. Oh, and yesterday I was tasked with trawling through hours of CCTV footage from near the cemetery. Lo and behold, there was nothing out of the ordinary to see.”

“And you’re still expected to teach on top of this?” Hannibal asked.

Will nodded faintly, legs splayed out in front of him. His socks were growing threadbare near the tips of his toes. “Yep,” he muttered. “They’ve got to make it clear that I’m not real FBI somehow.”

“By giving you twice the work and responsibility of a standard agent,” Hannibal pointed out. “I’m not surprised you’re chronically exhausted.”

The man’s gaze was sharp, lips twisting downwards. “This again?”

“Sleep deprivation is damaging to your health, especially when maintained over a long period of time and combined with stress. I dislike that you are being physically and mentally harmed for the sake of people who don’t seem to have any regard for your wellbeing.”

“What else am I supposed to do?” Will chewed at his already inflamed cuticles. “It’s not like I can just ignore the work that I’m doing.”

“Why not?”

The man bounced his foot up and down, pulling his arms closer to his chest. “Could you, if you thought you were saving lives?”

“Of course,” Hannibal replied. “I gave up a career that undoubtedly saved more lives than my psychiatry practice does, but I have no regrets in doing so.”

That caught Will’s interest, his head tilting to one side in consideration. “What were you?”

“I was an emergency surgeon. It was many years ago now and I’ve since transferred my passion for anatomy into the culinary arts.”

A smile pulled at Will’s lips. “Ah, so is the advice about sleep deprivation coming from a place of experience then?”

“While I require little sleep, my surgery days took their toll. I became very adept at sleeping whenever and wherever the opportunity presented itself. I’m happier living as I do now, with ample time for my extracurriculars and a steady seven hours of sleep each night.”

“Sounds nice,” Will sighed, fiddling with his glass and taking another sip.

“If you had more time for yourself, are there any projects you would work on?”

The man grimaced and nodded. “Well, for one, the dogs would get longer walks. I also bought a boat all the way back in January and I’ve been meaning to fix it up, but with everything going on, it’s just been left to rot out in my shed. I’d wanted to take it out during the summer, but with the way things are going, I won’t have the time.”

“Is it in need of much work?” Hannibal asked.

“It’s a wreck. The engine needs to be taken apart. Hull needs to be plugged for leaks. The whole thing needs a new layer of paint and the electronics could do with updating.”

Hannibal knew next to nothing about the intricacies of boat repair, so he nodded along. “A large endeavour for one man.”

Will smiled and rubbed the wooden trimmings of the armchair with his thumb. “I suppose,” he murmured. “But, I do enjoy working with my hands. Fishing, tying flies, fixing boats.”

“You’re a tactile man,” Hannibal granted.

It was becoming increasingly clear that Will’s hands never lay still. They were constantly touching, fiddling and brushing at one object or another. Always on the move, never still.

Will glanced down at where he was running his index finger along the groove of the wooden carving, pulling his hand away and setting it on his lap. “I, uh, I always have been,” he murmured. “My thoughts are clearer when my hands are occupied. Fidgety, is the word, I think.”

“Sensation is the tool we use to hone our minds onto precise edges,” Hannibal supplied. “I almost always have something nearby to occupy me. My art, my instruments. I listened to a recorded opera just earlier today.”

The man’s throat worked as he swallowed another sip. “Opera, why am I not surprised?” he muttered. “Which one?”

“Dido and Aeneas.”

There was a furrow between his eyebrows. “Oh, based on the Aeneid?”

“Indeed it is,” Hannibal replied. “It’s really quite the beautiful tragedy. Tell me, have you ever been to the opera before?”

Snorting, Will slumped backwards in his seat, staring upwards. “No, I can’t say I have. It always seemed like something for pretentious rich people to waste their time on.”

“Anyone can enjoy the opera, Will,” he scolded, “It is purity of emotion and sensation, unencumbered by the clumsy trappings of dialogue. You must try it at least once.”

Will’s lips were lopsided, his eyes crinkled with dry amusement. “I’ll consider it.”

“I’m a member of the Baltimore Fine Arts board, should you ever want recommendations or a ticket,” Hannibal offered.

He hadn’t expected Will’s sudden laughter.

“Is something funny?” he asked.

Will laughed several more times, but he ran a hand down his face as his mirth softened. He shook his head and placed his empty tumbler to one side. “No, god— no, it’s just... you’re so... *you*. All the time.”

Hannibal raised his eyebrows. “Who else would I be?”

The noise Will made was a conflicted one. “I don’t know. I just— I’ve never met someone so confidently and unabashedly strange. I think I actually envy you for it.”

“How so?”

Will sobered, his face falling and his eyes traveling to gaze up at the ceiling above. “I don’t think I’ve ever felt comfortable in my own skin. When I see you, you make it look so easy to just... be.”

“I practice radical self acceptance,” Hannibal replied, leaning forward to better watch the man’s shifting emotions. “I accept every part of myself, the good and the bad, unconditionally. Simply, there are parts of myself that will never change, so I accept them as they are, even if society deems them unseemly.”

“You make it sound easy,” Will sighed.

“It isn’t,” he replied gently. “It takes time and introspection. However, acknowledging who you are is the first step. You should know thyself.”

Will began fiddling with his sweater again. “I don’t know if I know who I am.”

“Knowing your desires is a good place to start. You desire peace and security, the comfort of your dogs and your home. You desire a feeling of accomplishment, whether fixing boats, tying flies or killing bad men.”

Will flinched slightly, his knuckles white as they clutched at the knitted fabric. “How do I accept a desire like that?” he whispered, his pain so beautifully displayed for Hannibal’s perusal in the slight hitch of his breath.

“At first you must simply face that it is there, that it’s a part of you that cannot be changed. No amount of guilt or self loathing will change the foundations of who you are.”

Will closed his eyes and turned his face away from Hannibal, his body still tight with tension. “I don’t know if I can...”

“You absolutely can, Will. I believe in you.”

The man was quiet for some time, his eyes closed and his hands finally loosening out of their clenched grip.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

With the conversation settling into its natural end, Hannibal eased himself back in his chair and reached for his neglected tumbler of brandy. He didn’t often indulge in spirits, but the empty whiskey bottles had demonstrated his guest's preferences and he was always a gracious host, if nothing else.

Sometimes he forgot how pleasant the smooth sting of the liquor was against the back of his throat, so he sat there quietly, enjoying each sip and savouring the experience that came with each one.

Eventually, he reached the end, leaving his cup empty.

Hannibal mentally returned to the room and he found it quiet and still. On closer inspection, he noted that his guest was silent.

Asleep.

“Will?”

There was no response.

Hannibal shifted forward in his chair and found that the profiler had slumped over to one side, head still tipped back. “Will?” he tried again, a little louder.

The man remained unconscious and unresponsive to his calls.

Sliding out of the seat, Hannibal stood silently and picked up a cushion. Contemplative, he approached his sleeping friend, fingers lightly gripping the velveteen fabric.

He stopped little more than a foot away from those sock garbed feet. Will’s chest rose and fell with the regularity of ocean tides, while his eyelashes were dark where they settled against the sickly pallor of his complexion. Parted lips were wet from the residuals of the brandy, shining slightly in the study's half light.

There was an odd beauty to him.

It wasn't the beauty of artwork, the type found in galleries or the halls of gilded museums. No, it was something base, something essential and vital. The angles of his face, the slight crook of his calloused fingers was like nature refined and distilled into human form, a force of roaring waves and blustering gales barely constrained by the flimsy trappings of humanity holding him together.

And Hannibal could kill him.

Should kill him, in fact.

Reclined and relaxed, heavy with warm food and heady drink, his mind would be too slow to act, his muscles too thick with rest to truly resist.

He could use the cushion to smother him.

The fabric was smooth, luxurious under his fingertips and Hannibal imagined the feel of it as Will would jerk and scratch at his hands to throw him off as his lungs grew increasingly starved of air. He would struggle until the end, wouldn't he? Kicking and shoving at Hannibal's shins, digging his nails so deep into his arms that Hannibal would forever be marked by him.

However, Will would be unable to budge him in the end.

Hannibal would triumph and he would feel the man's body grow slack and lifeless beneath him.

Hannibal swallowed.

His saliva tasted bitter and cloying on his tongue.

The thought of Will's lifeless body left something within him hollow and helpless. It felt as if there was necrotic tissue in his lungs, eating away at the living flesh and leaving only pus and abscesses in its wake.

Hannibal took a half step back, turning his head to stare into the fireplace. Wood splintered and flames flickered, sending sparks of embers into the air. Anger and confusion warred within him and part of him wanted to go through with it simply to spite this incessant, alien emotion blossoming under his skin.

The whim of death's touch had rarely bothered him in the past. Most death was either a victory or hindrance, the victory of one of his schemes or a failure of his hubris. But he didn't *grieve*. He never grieved. Not since Mischa.

And yet the thought of his friend's death left him with the stirrings of frigid grief and a sense of unsettling horror in his bones, so deep that it chilled him like the earth encased within permafrost.

It tasted like loss.

He swallowed again and purposefully rid himself of the tension in his muscles, easing himself back into the suddenly tight confines of his person suit and stitching the burst seams back together. It was harder work than it'd been in a long time. He'd never been so naked, so laid bare before another person.

Releasing a soft breath, he stepped forward and leant over Will to carefully remove his glasses and place them to one side.

The brown curls were so soft to the touch as he repositioned the man's head and slid the pillow beneath it. His poor posture would inevitably give Will neck pains if it wasn't righted. The man shifted slightly at the disturbance, dark eyelashes shifting, but Hannibal shushed him in low tones until he settled down again.

His scalp was warm as Hannibal lingered there and with fascination, he slid his fingers downwards to brush over the stubbled column of the man's throat.

A heart beat thudded lazily beneath the pale skin, slow and uninhibited.

It was a test of will to hold his fingers there.

A slight tightening of his hand and Will Graham would be no more. The vitality of his blushed lips would grow blue with violence and then pale with death. His complexion, as haggard and marred with insomnia as it was, would grow wane and flat with the stillness of his chest.

But his heart continued to beat, a small ticking metronome.

Would it feel the same to touch him in death? To find ice where he currently found heat. To find the rigor of stiffened muscles where he now found the forgiveness of supple flesh.

No, it wouldn't.

The metronome of Will's life continued to tick, mocking him.

If he killed him, what would he eat first?

His brain? It was a beautiful thing and it deserved the reverence it hadn't received in life, always underappreciated, always feared by both its owner and those that surrounded him. Hannibal desired to take it with him, something of Will forever tucked away in the safety of his belly.

But maybe his heart would be the greater delight, somehow a repayment for the turmoil Will had caused in his own chest. He would take his heart to sooth the ache in his own. Penance. Retribution.

He would eat him in his entirety, regardless. That much was certain. There would be nothing for him to display and Hannibal wouldn't allow anyone else the privilege of gazing upon him. A man so misunderstood in life didn't deserve the same torment in death.

Perhaps he would keep one of his bones for safe keeping, to give him something to touch and hold when the after images of his memories were no longer enough, when the halls of mind grew too quiet, when the sound of Will's voice was but a faint whisper of recollection.

But no.

No.

He wouldn't.

He didn't want to see the broken shards of Will splayed out on the floor before him. There would be no replacement, no recreation as fine as him. Entropy would cast Hannibal's actions forever in stone, in the shards of broken porcelain and he would have to live with the aftermath.

His hand reluctantly fell away from the man's neck and he went about digging out the blanket he kept folded away in one of the bookcase cabinets to distract himself.

Taking care to cover the man from toes to chin, Hannibal tucked the corners of the heavy throw around the profiler's shoulders. Without shoes on, Will's feet would surely be growing cold, so he was also careful to cover them as well.

Maybe next time he would offer him a pair of slippers.

Content with his work, Hannibal returned to his chair and sunk into his thoughts.

The clock's hand continued its voyage. Nine soon became ten, slowly lapsing into eleven. As the minute hand drifted towards the half past mark, Will shifted, drawing in a deep breath and releasing it as a long sigh.

Soon his fingers twitched, his jaw tightened and finally he raised his head an inch.

"I'm sorry, I'm not exactly being a good guest, am I?" Will mumbled through the thickness of sleep, rubbing his eyes and stifling a yawn.

"Nonsense, Will," Hannibal replied with a pleased tilt to his head. "You have a long drive home, so it's good for you to rest before attempting the journey."

Will slouched in the chair, still soft, dazed and huddled under the blanket. He reached for his face and then frowned a little. "Where are my— ah," he murmured, spotting his glasses set to one side. Unfolding the arms, he slid them back up his nose and stretched his arms above his head.

His hand made contact with the cushion propped behind him and he glanced over at Hannibal with blearily narrowed eyes. "You could've woken me."

"And deny you the sleep you clearly needed?" Hannibal countered. "I'm not so cruel."

Letting out a short noise adjacent to a scoff, Will relaxed for a while, head turned towards the ceiling and eyes closed. "Not riveting company, though, I imagine."

He'd been captivating, even in sleep, but Hannibal didn't think admitting to having stared at the man as he slept for two hours was a socially acceptable response, so he watered the sentiment down. "I have yet to find a version of your presence that I haven't enjoyed."

There was a smile on the profiler's lips as he ran a hand down his face.

When he finally sat upright, Will glanced at the grandfather clock and swore under his breath. "Shit, it's late. I should head off," he said, untangling himself from the blanket and haphazardly dumping it on the armchair.

"Ah, yes, time has somewhat gotten away from us, hasn't it?" Hannibal contemplated, standing in a single movement and leading Will through the house to the front door. He considered offering Will the spare room for the night, but he knew it would be fruitless. An offer for another time, perhaps.

Once in the foyer, Will yanked on his battered boots and fumbled with the laces. "It was, uh, nice tonight," he said as he scowled down at his fingers, shifting from one shoe to the next.

"A masterpiece can only be made with the finest of ingredients," Hannibal replied, taking down Will's jacket from the peg. "I appreciated that you thought of me today. My evening would've been far less interesting otherwise."

Once he straightened again, Hannibal held out the jacket and helped Will into it, despite the man's initial uncertainty. He took care to neaten Will's collar as he did so, smoothing the fabric with a gentle pat against his chest. Will accepted the contact with far less tension than he had the last time Hannibal had reached for him and he idly wondered if Will could be tamed down in the same way one desensitised a feral cat to humans. Maybe he could get him to eventually anticipate the slight brush of skin on skin. Enjoy it, even.

Will's eyes were hidden again behind his glasses and his expression twitched as he drifted closer to the door. "I had fun," he murmured.

"Should I expect a next time to our arrangement?" Hannibal asked, opening the door and steeling himself against the chill that blustered its way inside, so stark in comparison to the warm comfort of his study.

Stepping out into the cold, Will paused for a minute on the top step, pursing his lips and gazing into the night. "Sure. Yes, a next time would be good."

The light, buzzing emotion under his skin was unfamiliar to him, but he tampered down his reaction to a slight smile. "Drive safely, Will."

Will grinned back sheepishly and then turned away.

Hannibal stood bathed in the light of the porch as he watched Will's retreating figure slink into the darkness. He saw as car's lights flickered on, heard the slam of a door and the dull rumble of the engine.

He continued to watch as Will Graham left his home alive and well.

“It would’ve been impractical,” Hannibal reasoned to himself, ignoring the sweet ache in his chest as Will’s car turned a corner and disappeared from view. “I would’ve had to dispose of his vehicle, not to mention the phone records.”

That’d never stopped him before and even as he said it out loud, the excuses were just that, excuses.

Post hoc rationalisations to sooth the sting of his own folly.

It didn’t matter how he tried to justify his inaction, there was only one reason why Will was still alive. And it was simply that Hannibal couldn’t find the desire within himself to kill him.

The prison strategy was beginning to seem more and more tempting again, but Hannibal knew that with it, there would be no more evenings of Will’s sleeping visage under honeyed fire light. There would no curls for him to card his fingers through. There would be no more freshly caught fish delivered to his doorstep with a nervous frown.

As Hannibal closed the front door, he heard Dido’s lament ringing in his ears for a second time that day, a ghostly facsimile of the sorrowful mezzo-soprano.

But, ah, it made sense at last.

He was both betrayer and betrayed. His heart was being lead astray by a false god with all seeing eyes and prophetic lips, and in doing so, he betrayed himself by abandoning the previous values and principles that’d kept him alive and free for so long.

He was falling upon his own sword.

What agony he’d found in this predicament of his.

It was Monday morning.

Jack Crawford stood in the entrance to his office, a tall figure with his chin set sternly against the Baltimore cold.

“Good morning,” Hannibal greeted, mentally checking the location of the nearest weapon. He had a syringe of sedative hidden away in his desk, but his scalpel was unfortunately set beside his drawing supplies, too far away to reach in the worst case scenario. He’d neglected to wear sock garters that morning. “I don’t believe you have an appointment.”

The man reached into his coat and Hannibal readied himself for the appearance of a gun, only relaxing again when he drew out a badge. “Hello, Doctor Lecter. My name is Agent Jack Crawford and I’m the head of the FBI's behavioural analysis unit. I was wondering if I could come in?”

Hannibal didn’t let go of the door, instead inspecting Crawford's face for signs of tension or fear. He found neither, but that wasn’t quite enough to assuage his apprehension.

“Is this a matter that requires a warrant, Agent Crawford?” he asked with a facade of a smile.

The broad man let out a small laugh and shook his head. “Ah, my apologies, Doctor. No, this isn’t part of an investigation. I come on the recommendation of Dr Bloom. She said you’re quite the insightful psychiatrist and may be able to help with a staffing issue in my department.”

Ah, so Alana had seen fit to bring his name into the fray.

How interesting.

He presented Jack with a slightly more genuine smile and stepped away from the door with a welcoming wave of his hand. “In which case, please come in.”

Agent Crawford nodded and followed him into the office, unwinding his scarf from around his neck as he looked around appreciatively (Hannibal made note of the scarf should he need to strangle the man with it later). “You have a beautiful place,” he commented, walking beneath the balcony to glance over the book titles.

“I find that having a pleasing environment ensures my patients are able to fully engage with my therapy. Sometimes books can be an excellent conversation starter for those hesitant to discuss harsher topics,” Hannibal explained, walking over to his desk to push the sketch of his latest tableau beneath the other papers. He held the scalpel as he sharpened a pencil.

“Good, good,” Crawford murmured, before coming to stand by one of the chairs. He didn’t sit and neither did Hannibal.

“So, Agent Crawford, how may I be of service to you?”

The frown returned to the man’s face, his brows drawn together. “Are you familiar with a Will Graham?”

“Yes, I am somewhat familiar with the name,” he replied. “He’s made quite the stir in the news in recent months, hasn't he?”

A stiff exasperation made itself known in the man’s body language. A darting of his eyes, a stern clench to his jaw.

“Will is... well, I think the easiest way to describe him is as the best that there is,” Crawford said slowly. “As a profiler, his case closure rate is exceptional. His work for my team is indispensable in putting away the some of the worst that humanity has to offer.”

Hannibal smiled in the knowledge that the absolute worst was stood opposite Crawford now and the man was still none the wiser. “He is a genius in his field. But I take it that it isn’t all plain sailing?”

“No, it’s not,” the agent sighed. He began idly walking around the room. “As an employee, he’s difficult to work with and I have concerns.”

Hannibal always enjoyed observing how his visitors navigated the space he presented to them. It told him much about their habits, their behaviours. Some would stand under the balcony to find protection in the tighter space, while others would stand in the window’s light, gazing up at the patch of sky visible beyond Hannibal’s desk.

Jack Crawford moved with even footsteps that fell heavy on the ground. He was clearly someone with purpose and drive, someone who commanded authority and rarely ever felt the need to diminish himself. There was an air of ease to way he walked between the chairs, as if the world was something he was comfortable passing through, something that was free for him to behold and inspect as he liked.

“Difficulties with colleagues?” Hannibal pressed.

Crawford made a dismissive noise. “Difficulties with anyone that doesn’t have four legs and a tail. He’s short with students, abrupt with co-workers and worst of all, he's dismissive with me and the rest of his superiors.”

That certainly fit in with everything Hannibal knew about the man. “Is this impacting his work?”

“In a way...” The man stood before a copy of the painting, medusa murtola by Caravaggio, a quirk to his brow as he considered the woman’s anguished features. “He has a history of... mental instability. As you would imagine, cases can be disturbing and dangerous at times. It’s important that he engages with me and others, so we know that he's safe and stable. To put it frankly, I’m worried about him.”

It was a shame they saw his Will as a fragile teacup, but there was a satisfaction in knowing that he had the pleasure of the man’s beauty all to himself. Hannibal had never considered himself possessive before, and yet he was discovering that Will brought out unusual feelings in him.

It was as fascinating as it was disturbing.

“Has there been an incident?”

Crawford pulled his eyes away from the image, clasping his hands together. “Yes. His identity was compromised recently in a high profile case. The lack of trust he has in the department is a liability and I’m concerned it could begin to hinder his work.”

There it was.

The rift, the tension, the *crack*. It was there, ready and waiting for Hannibal to pry apart. All it needed was for him to slide into place and twist his blade.

“I see,” he murmured, putting on a display of pursing his lips in thought and crossing his arms. “I take it that this is where I’m required?”

Jack paused and looked at Hannibal, his shoulders relaxing.

“You have a reputation, Doctor Lecter. Alana informed me that you have an excellent track record with... difficult patients.”

Hannibal smiled. “I specialise in social exclusion and rare psychiatric disorders. My work has often involved working with sometimes violent individuals.”

“Will isn’t violent,” Crawford clarified hastily. “I just need someone able to get past his defences.”

How little he knew.

“Taciturn may be a better description of him ,” Hannibal corrected himself. “I have been able to successfully build rapport with uncooperative individuals in the past, so I’m certainly willing to try my best to aid you. At the end of the day, whether or not Will engages with me is up to him.”

The man pursed his lips and nodded once. “I understand of course, Doctor. I’d be very happy to welcome you onto our team.”

Hannibal smiled.

“It would be an honour, Agent Crawford.”

How fun.

Chapter End Notes

Dear God this was a long chapter. I hope you enjoyed Hannibal's absolutely shameless flirting and Will's obliviousness.

As always, I love hearing your thoughts on the chapters!

Art of Hannibal watching Will leave
Dido’s lament for those that want to hear it

A Brief Interlude with Freddie Lounds

Chapter Summary

In which Freddie Lounds meets a fan.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It wasn't difficult getting past the guards at the front entrance. A simple flash of her press identification pass and a forged visitor letter from the esteemed Doctor Chilton had seen to that. Anyway, it was his fault for leaving his signature and personal information online for almost anyone to stumble across.

It was practically an invitation in itself.

The Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane loomed up ahead and she made sure to pause to take some suitably ominous photos of the place. She reckoned she could squeeze in a couple extra ad slots if she used them as filler.

Freddie Lounds walked along the driveway and stared up at the decidedly unwelcoming welcome sign, her camera whirring as she continued to document the journey.

She could've trotted up the front steps into the grand foyer reserved for visitors and, other, more reputable, journalists, but she hadn't ever been particularly bothered by ridiculous concepts like 'private property' or 'anti-trespassing laws'. So instead, she wandered further along and followed the thinner access road towards the hospital's back entrance.

Away from the pretty facade of the hospital front, the rear of the building looked far more like the maximum security prison it was intended to be. All harsh red bricks, barred windows and electrified barriers.

The guarded entrance for prisoner transport was easy enough to find, marked out by metal fences and barbed wire.

She camped in good spot nearby within the range of her camera zoom, hopefully out of sight enough to not draw too much attention to herself. Checking her watch, she took care to test her camera settings. After all, there'd only be a brief window of opportunity to get the photos she needed. There was no time to waste.

Today was the day the mushroom man would finally be locked away from society for good.

As she'd been on the forefront of the Stamments debacle, she knew that a final article on the matter would give her readers closure and a hearty spoonful of schadenfreude to match. She

had about fifty mushroom themed hoodies and ten key chains still in stock, so she was hoping a final few photographs of the man and a short piece would empty up the warehouse shelves for the next round of merchandise she had planned.

There was just five minutes to go when she heard footsteps.

Freddie stiffened suddenly, her finger trained on the shutter button when a shadow fell over where she crouched in a flower bed, the warmth of the sun suddenly gone from the back of her neck. She turned, eyes narrowed, only to find a man stood there patiently at the edge of the concrete walkway.

Straightening up and turning to fully face him, she put on a pleasant smile, the one that she practised each morning in the bathroom mirror. “Oh, gosh, I didn’t notice you there,” she said with a forced laugh.

The man wore the BSHCI employee uniform, the clothes plain white and slightly creased with use. A name tag sat clipped to his breast pocket, the name ‘BROWN' emblazoned across it. “Good afternoon, Miss Lounds,” the orderly said with a sincerity that Freddie immediately knew was forced. There was a slight lisp to his words. “If you’re here to take photographs of our newest patient, I’m afraid his transport is running late from the courts.”

Dammit.

Freddie had a meeting with one of her other contacts in an hour, so she didn’t have the time to waste loitering around for a glimpse of Eldon Stammets.

“Oh, what a shame,” she said, allowing her camera to hang on the strap she kept around her neck at all times.

“Doctor Chilton has asked me to have you vacate the premises, Miss. Although, it’s a shame because I enjoy your articles. They're very enlightening.”

There was a stillness and lack of emotion to his eyes that Freddie recognised and she internally groaned. Another psycho of a fan. It was a shame that crime journalism was so profitable, because she was really getting sick of having to spend so much time with nutjobs.

“Ah, thank you, Mr... Brown, is it?” she ventured.

His smile only grew wider, hands tucked behind his back. “Matthew, Miss Lounds. Call me Matthew. I read your recent articles on the Ripper case. The photos were really were incredible. It’s amazing how up *close* you were. And that shot you got of that special agent was really quite... funny. He didn’t look too pleased to see you, did he?”

Psycho or not, Freddie enjoyed the praise and allowed a genuine curl of her lips to show through. “Graham never looks pleased. I don’t think that man even knows how to smile.”

Brown, no, Matthew, straightened a little and leant forward conspiratorially. “Is it true what you said about him? That he *understands* killers?” The question was asked with an air of secrecy.

Freddie always liked the odd bit of rumour spreading, so she leant in and dropped her voice. “Oh yes, that’s how he catches them. I’ve seen Mr Graham at work and he always seems a bit *too* invested if you ask me. It wouldn’t surprise me if he understands them because he is one himself.”

Graham always gave her the creeps, but in the pathetic way that made her want to crush the twitchy mess of a man beneath her boot. It was similar to the way she saw spiders, cockroaches and the other creepy crawlies of the world that had no business being within a ten foot radius of her.

The orderly grinned, glancing away to stare beyond the line of hospital’s walls and chain link fences. There was a power line in the distance. Along the wire were dark speckles of birds arranged in a line.

“So he’s no sparrow then?” he asked, eyes wide and shoulders relaxed.

Freddie scoffed. “A sparrow? God no, he’s definitely something with talons and a taste for meat.”

The smile was unrelenting to an almost disturbing degree, but as soon as she began to consider slinking away, he seemed to snap back into reality and turned to her.

“Anyway, Miss Lounds, how about I show you to the exit? We wouldn’t want you getting lost on your way out,” he said, gesturing back the way she came.

“Ah, sure. Thanks,” she replied begrudgingly, clipping her lens cover back into place.

Freddie supposed not every excursion could be a shining success, but it wasn’t the end of the world. She would simply recycle some of the photos she had from the court case instead.

And if she managed to slide her business card into the orderly’s pocket with a murmured encouragement to reach out, who was to say it was all for nothing?

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading my work! I realise this is a short update, but the next full chapter is close to complete so expect it in the next week (ish).

Also, side note, while I find Freddie utterly repulsive, I kinda love her as a character.

As always, I love hearing your thoughts! Your lovely comments kept me slightly saner during my thesis write up, so I really appreciate it.

In Which the BAU Gains a New Member

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

THE CHESAPEAKE RIPPER'S NEW MUSE

Welcome once again dear readers to another Tattlecrime exclusive! After the terrifying events that recently took place at the Baltimore State Cemetery, this journalist finds herself delving deeper into the mystery surrounding the most daring, disgusting criminal of the modern era and his twisted connection to the FBI's most notorious 'special agent'.

Will's glaring features stared up at him from the page, immortalised in black ink.

"Seriously, Jack?" Will said, snapping his eyes away from the page. "A tree had to die for this paper and you just had to print Tattlecrime on it."

Jack regarded him with raised eyebrows, hands shoved into his pockets. "If you'd answered my email the first time, I wouldn't have needed to."

Will continued setting up his laptop as a steady stream of students found their seats, a general chatter filling the air. "Apologies for not wanting to spend the little free time I have reading one of Lounds's articles on me. I might be crazy, but I'm not that crazy."

"I had Kade Purnell on my line earlier this week asking me why one of my team was, quote 'having a sordid and depraved affair with the Chesapeake Ripper'. That's directly from the article, by the way," Jack said, tapping the page with his index finger. "It doesn't look good for the department."

He clicked the file for his latest lecture, checking the projector as the title page flashed up against the wall. "Blame Lounds," he muttered. "I said 'no comment'."

"Well, next time, don't say anything at all. You see her, you leave. We don't need any more articles about serial killers leaving gifts for our investigators."

Scratching his neck, Will ducked his head in submission. "Sure, fine. Fine. I'll do my best to avoid her."

Jack flashed a brief, stiff smile at him.

There was a sort of bone weary weight to him that morning, the lines around his lips more defined, a tired redness to his eyes. Will could see how the Ripper was wearing on the man and he wondered how Mrs Crawford's treatment was faring. While Jack was a man made of hard stone, eventually the water would grind him down just like it did everything else.

"Good. By the way, today's progress meeting is happening in Conference Room J. We couldn't get the usual room. One of the white-collar crime units needed it. You'll be there, won't you?" Jack pressed, leaning against the desk.

As much as the weekly BAU progress meetings made him die a little inside, he nodded. “Uh, yeah, I’ll be there. Anyway, Jack, I really need to start this class. We’ve got a lot to cover,” he said, with a slight gesture towards the door.

Jack glanced up at the presentation and grimaced at the enlarged photo splashed up there for all to see. “All right. I’ll leave you to your... blowfly larvae.”

Watching as the agent retreated from the room, Will only felt the tension in his spine unwind once the door slammed shut behind him. He picked up the garish article and scowled down at his face again, before he crumpled it up, tossed it in the trash can and straightened upright.

He clapped his hands once.

“Okay, that’s enough chatter. Let's begin,” he announced, looking towards his teaching notes and ignoring the eyes of his students.

Quantico was a miserable construct of concrete blocks and brutalist facades. After a while the bland beige corridors began to meld into one another, so while Will knew the way between the lecture theatre, his office, the canteen and Jack’s room, getting anywhere else was always like trying to find a needle in a very bland haystack.

As he was squinting at one of the signposts tacked to the wall, trying to decipher the code that it seemed to be written in, he heard a short cough from behind.

He turned and found Beverly leaning against the opposite wall, watching him with a small mischievous look. “Someone looks lost,” she teased.

Will made a disgruntled noise and waved a hand at the colour coded placard. “How am I supposed to know what Administration Block Corridor 3B means? Is a map really too much to ask for?”

Grinning, she stepped towards him. “Ah, you’ve never been to Conference Room J before, have you? It’s actually over in ballistics.”

He groaned slightly. “Of course it is.”

The woman let out an amused sound. “It’s just as well I was around to save your ass. What would you do without me?”

“Get lost, uh, turn up to the meeting twenty minutes late and then get chewed out by Jack, probably,” he admitted, allowing Beverly’s cheerful mood to ease some of his own apprehension. “I guess I owe you a coffee or something.”

She made an excited noise and beckoned for him to follow her in the opposite direction to the one he’d been heading in. “Well, I’m never going to turn down free caffeine,” she replied.

“Anyway, you’re a sight for sore eyes. You’ve not been down to the labs in a while. Still working through camera footage?”

Will hummed through pursed lips. “I am. I’m getting to the end of it, but it’s not exactly interesting work. How have things been down there?”

“Oh, a nightmare,” she said, holding the door open for him as they entered the stairwell. “Brian somehow managed to lose one of Grave’s fingers, so I spent most of my morning on one of the weirdest Easter eggs hunts of my life.”

“No chocolate egg at end, I'm guessing?”

“Uh huh,” she said, lightly gripping the bannister on the way up. “Jack brought down the new guy for a bit, so we all had to stand around pretending everything was fine until they left again. Jimmy found it behind the autoclave in the end, thank god, but it reeked like hell at that point.”

That made Will pause. “Uh, there’s a new guy?”

Beverly stopped a couple steps above him and looked around at him, her mouth ajar. “Didn’t they tell you? Apparently a new consultant is joining the team. A criminal psychologist, I think?”

No one had bothered to mention that to him.

He chewed at his nails as he started up the stairs again, unable to shift the sense that something bad was about to happen. He’d seen Jack that morning. Why hadn’t he said anything then? Why would he neglect to mention that they’d hired another consultant?

“What was he like?” he asked, all too aware that he was staring at his feet.

“He was odd, but I think in this line of work you have to be a bit strange. Overly formal, polite. I didn’t catch his name. But who knows, maybe it’s a good thing. It might take some of the heat off of you,” she said, casting him a significant glance.

The sudden flare of jealously in his chest was unexpected, and he fought to tamper down his reaction with gritted teeth.

The emotion was dark and sickly, like treacled blood and it ran black through his veins, dirtying everything it touched. Half of him didn’t want the Ripper to lose interest in him and the other half of him was disgusted for having the thought at all.

Pathetic.

He was pathetic.

A murderer, a *monster* who killed without remorse, had given him just a shred of attention and he was already lapping it up and begging for another drop. What did it say about him, that he was so desperate for validation he’d even take it from a man who regularly disembowelled and ate people for fun?

Nothing good, that was for certain.

They were walking over one of the concrete bridges now, passing uniformed agents. Through the broad windows, Will could see trainees running out on the athletics courses below in their dark sweaters, each emblazoned with ‘FBI’ in bright yellow print.

“Yeah, that would probably be for the best,” he murmured weakly.

If Beverly noticed anything off about his response, she didn’t voice it.

She continued to talk as they traversed the corridors. It was mostly about casual topics like the latest lab gossip and the new apartment she’d recently moved into, but he was happy to walk alongside her and listen, occasionally prompting her with a small question or observation. It gave him something to think about other than the looming dread hanging over his head, growing darker and heavier with every step forward.

They turned onto a new corridor, this one just as monotonous as the rest. One of the light bulbs about half way down was blinking on and off, on and off. It buzzed faintly as they passed it and Will gazed up at the glowing filament for a moment, before he blinked and the light went out again.

“Oh, hello, you two!” a voice called from up ahead. “I’m glad you found the room alright.”

Will glanced towards the source of the sound. Alana stood beside one of the doors towards the end of the passageway. She was dressed immaculately, he noted vaguely, but her hands were clasped together over her stomach as they approached, the skin pulled tight about her knuckles.

“Morning, Doctor Bloom,” Beverly greeted, walking slightly ahead of Will. “Are we waiting on anyone?”

The woman smiled at them, the sort of practiced habitual smile people got used to flashing whenever they wanted to keep a conversation civil. It did nothing to ease his concerns. “We were just waiting on you two actually. Will, could I have a quick word?”

Beverly paused, her hand on the door handle as she glanced between Alana and him, her eyebrows pinched in concern. She sent him a questioning glance and didn’t head inside just yet.

He responded to her silent question with a grimace and a resigned nod. “Er, okay. Sure,” he replied.

The door closed behind Katz and he was left alone with Alana in the isolated corridor, both of them desperately avoiding the other’s eyes. “So, um... what’s this about?” he asked, stuffing his hands in his pockets to avoid the temptation to fidget.

In the distance, the sounds of faint gun shots could be heard from the firing ranges.

Alana pushed a strand of hair behind her ear, catching her bottom lip between her teeth before releasing it again. “Well, in short, we have someone new joining us today.”

The dread thickened.

Will nodded slowly. “Yes, Beverly mentioned that there was a new guy.”

Her expression shifted towards something resembling uncertainty. “Oh, you... heard?” she said with wide eyes, before quickly gathering herself and smiling half heartedly. Although, it was more of a grimace really. “Well, yes. He’s an old colleague of mine, actually. From John Hopkins. Jack and I thought it would be best if I took a less active role in the team for a little while.”

The thinly concealed veneer of secrecy came crumbling down as the puzzle pieces came together to form a grim picture. Will made a conscious decision to not react, just nodding weakly and clearing his throat.

They’d clearly decided that Alana’s role as Will’s ballast was over.

Of course, they weren’t wrong. That ship had sailed as soon as Will had woken up handcuffed to a hospital bed. Any trust or intimacy from before had burnt away with his sanity, leaving only the thinly stripped remains of his shattered regards behind.

But that meant that their newest member of the team was there as Alana's *replacement*. Not another mind to help on cases. *No*. A mind there to observe him, to dissect him, to pin him down and claw their nails into his eye sockets to get a glimpse of the pink brain matter behind them.

“I see,” he said, voice stiff, steadying himself with a clench of the jaw. He resisted the urge to press his back against the wall, his spine too exposed.

“He’s really excellent at what he does, so I know he’ll be a good addition to the team,” she continued earnestly. “I would really appreciate it if you made him feel welcome.”

Will made a small, wry noise, raising his eyebrows. “Are you telling me to behave, Dr Bloom?”

Her expression crumpled in on itself as she looked at him pleadingly. “Just...” she attempted, wringing her hands. “Please, just try to stay on good terms with him. He’s doing me a huge personal favour by coming here.”

Will only raised his eyebrows further.

He felt a bit like a toddler being told to behave.

“In that case, I promise I won’t say any *mean* words to him. However, I reserve the right to throw a toy at his head if he tugs my hair too hard,” he replied.

Alana attempted to look stern, but the effect was ruined as she wrapped her arms around herself, leaving her looking like a kicked puppy. “You know, if you gave him a chance, you might even enjoy his insight.”

“You’re pushing your luck a bit there,” he replied with a wry twist of his lip. “Anyway, we’re probably holding everyone up... so, shall we?” He gestured towards the door.

The sooner he got this over and done with, the sooner he could go back to hiding in the recesses of Quantico.

As they entered the conference room, Will found it dimly lit, the blinds drawn. The main light source was from a large screen mounted on the far wall and it emitted a pale blue glow that seemed to drain the warmth from everything it touched.

Everyone else was already assembled, with only two empty places remaining at the oval table.

Alana brushed past him as she took the seat beside Jack, who was currently wrestling with a HDMI cable and his laptop, but Will didn’t move to sit just yet. He was frozen to the spot.

His throat was dry.

Hannibal Lecter was sat beside the only remaining chair, just as coiffed and faultlessly dressed as he always was. The broad shoulders and sharp jut of his cheekbones was unmistakable, and when those dark eyes flickered towards him, the man’s lips curled at the edges.

Will took a step back, desperately looking around the room for more cracks in reality, more signs that his sanity was beginning to slip again. Had the encephalitis come back for another round, only this time manifesting itself in plaid three piece suits?

His eyes darted to Doctor Lecter again.

Was there even someone in that chair, or was he looking at empty seat? Maybe he was simply staring at a stranger, a familiar face superimposed over the unfamiliar. The line between his mind and reality, already so blurred and muddied, continued to twist and bleed.

Jack cleared his throat. “Will, take a seat,” he said, nodding to the empty chair.

For a moment, Jack sent a look to the newcomer, confirming that there *was* indeed someone sat there after all. But, that was only a small comfort.

Breaths loud in his ears, Will took the several short paces towards the hallucination, cautiously reaching out a hand to tug the chair backwards. It screeched as the legs scraped along the ground, and creaked as it took his weight.

He spread his hands against the table’s cool wood to ground himself more firmly in reality, listening to the tick of the clock from above and the click of the mouse as Jack fiddled with his laptop. He took a deep breath and released it again.

The exercise was interrupted by a voice.

“Hello, Will.”

Will's shoulders tensed, his old wound protesting slightly as his teeth snapped shut. His eyes darted to the source of the dulcet greeting, the words uttered far too softly, too intimately for such a stark setting.

He swallowed and wetted his dry lips. "Hello, Doctor Lecter."

The spell didn't break.

The world didn't collapse.

In fact, everything stayed the same. The doctor continued to smile at him with familiar creases framing his eyes, while the science team chattered from the other side of the table.

He wasn't hallucinating.

Relief flooded him, but it was swiftly replaced with dawning horror.

Sliding them beneath the table, he twisted his hands together until the bones ached.

Doctor Lecter was not a criminal psychologist. As far as Will knew, the man had never even stepped foot in a crime scene, and while he was well versed in taking apart the minds of the strange and depraved, it was clear that he hadn't been brought there just to work on cases.

He was there to profile *him*.

"Will, I'd like you to meet Doctor Lecter," Jack said, once he looked up from his keyboard. "He's going to assist our team on future cases."

Will could taste blood and he decidedly did *not* look towards the man he'd begun to consider his friend. He barred his teeth and leant forward. "Do we really need another profiler, Jack?" he asked. It sounded too close to a hiss. "It seems like an interesting use of FBI funds to hire a man with no background in criminal investigation."

Alana flinched and her eyes grew wide. He saw her fear, the realisation that he *knew*. "Will, Hannibal was invited in on my recommendation. Please extend him some professional courtesy."

"Courtesy?" he spat. He turned to Doctor Lecter and waved a hand at the blank faced man. "I don't consider hiring a psychiatrist to monitor me behind my back to be particularly courteous, Doctor Bloom. I might go as far as to say that it's, in fact, rather rude."

In the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of Lecter's growing smile.

The sanctimonious bastard.

Jack pointed at Will with a levelled gazed and furrowed brows. "That's enough," he warned with a meaningful tilt of his head. "We've got bodies and cases coming in left and right, and we need a team able to take that burden. The Doctor is here to provide support."

“To support the team, or to support me?” Will bit back. “I can’t help but notice that everyone else seemed aware of this before I was. What was this meant to be, an intervention? An ambush?”

The science team were eerily silent now and his face grew hot with the licking sting of humiliation. All eyes turned to him like they were the pins they used to tack up victim photos, inspecting him and finding him lacking. He wanted nothing more than to be alone again, to hide, to duck his head, to not hear another human voice for a very, very long time.

“Will, I can assure you that the intention was not to make you feel singled out,” Doctor Lecter said from his side.

Snapping around, Will glowered at his friend to silence him, before he looked back at Jack and Alana.

“Well, consider me feeling singled out,” Will said stiffly, reaching down, wrestling out a pile of notes from his bag and slapping them down with more force than necessary. “Anyway, the last time I checked, this was supposed to be a meeting about the Chesapeake Ripper case, so could we maybe get back on topic? Please?”

Will pressed his palms into his eye sockets as he sat slumped in his dingy office, trying to shift the headache taking residence just behind his temples. It was stress. He knew it was stress, but it didn’t stop him from fumbling with the desk drawer as he searched for a medicine bottle and twisted the lid open. Tipping a pill into his palm, he swallowed the aspirin dry.

The powder coating left a bitter tang on his tongue.

It almost tasted as bitter as his mood.

“Fuck,” he muttered, forehead thudding against his desk, only cushioned by a forensics report that still smelled vaguely of acetone. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.” He thunked his head against the surface several more times for good measure.

He should’ve known better than to get involved. His decision to start socialising had been bad news from beginning to end and he was really getting sick of being constantly thrown through a loop by *people*.

Why was nothing ever easy?

Why could he never just have something *good* in his life?

Why did it always hurt in the end?

“Snap out of it,” he berated himself, taking a long, deep breath. “It’s nothing you haven’t put up with before.”

He took another calming breath.

The meeting was over and done now anyway.

It’d been a blur of discomfort, internal turmoil, and the barely restrained need to escape and lick his wounds somewhere dark and difficult to find. He vaguely recalled the conversations, the discussion of the current evidence, the quickly cooling leads that seemed to always go nowhere and the severe lines engraved into Jack’s forehead.

The only notable progress made in the past week had been the identification of the final Ripper victim, a Mr Marcus Ortega. He was an unemployed retiree with no family or close friends and his home was 5 short miles away from the cemetery where his body had been discovered. The only sign he’d been killed, dissected and transported from that location was a single drop of blood on his pillow case and the back door of the house that’d been left propped open with a small dog figurine taken from the man’s mantelpiece.

No other evidence had been found.

No prints.

No hairs.

No DNA.

Nothing.

Looking over the files again, Will suspected the Ripper was deliberately wasting their resources and time. Maybe he meant to lead them in circles until they were too tired and worn to fight back, ripe for the butcher’s block.

Sometimes it seemed as if the only way they’d ever catch the Ripper was if he turned up on the FBI’s doorstep offering them a human leg on a platter.

Taking a pen, he continued to glance over the photos of Ortega’s home, pursing his lips at the sight of the small dog statue. It bugged him for some reason, like a light prod on the shoulder or the brush of an antler.

He heard footsteps in the corridor.

They were lighter and slower than Jack’s purposeful strides, so he ignored them and returned to the photos, scratching a note in the margin. The dismissal proved too hasty when a series of short, sharp knocks rung against the door.

He recognised that knock.

Will reached for his glasses and pushed them up his nose to prepare himself for the onslaught. He regarded the office entrance with a scowl before raising his chin.

“What is it?” he called, remaining firmly seated.

The handle shifted downwards and the door creaked faintly as Doctor Lecter let himself inside. Standing in the door frame, he held a lunch bag at his side but he made no move towards the desk.

“Am I welcome?” he asked, gesturing towards the bag that no doubt contained more of his culinary temptations.

Will didn’t immediately respond and instead he rolled back in his office chair, crossing his arms over his chest to regard his unwanted visitor.

“What do you think, Doctor?” Will replied, drumming a finger against his elbow.

The man pulled a thoughtful expression that lacked any and all remorse, before humming to himself. “You’re angry with me, yet I also suspect you’re curious to know why I’m here and what I’ve brought for lunch.”

He’d hit the nail on the head, but Will wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of admitting that.

He blinked owlishly. “And just how did you find my office?”

Lecter smiled at him. “After my meeting with Alana, my first port of call was your classroom, but I discovered it empty. A very kind trainee pointed me down here, although I must say the directions left something to be desired. How do people ever find you?”

Will set his jaw. “They don’t.”

Gazing around, the psychiatrist took in Will’s hiding spot, raising his eyebrows slightly at the box of pinned insects he had set on one of the shelves beside his textbooks.

“Would you be open to a conversation?” the man asked eventually. “I think we should discuss what happened earlier today.”

Will continued to scowl, tapping his shoe against the concrete ground in a steady succession of beats. “Discussions and resolutions are a privilege reserved for friends, Doctor. Last I heard, you’re supposed to be my psychiatrist now.”

The needling seemed to land this time, Lecter’s grip on the handle of his bag tightening and then purposefully relaxing. The man stepped inside and closed the door behind him with a soft click, resting his back against the wood.

“Will,” he began, placing down his bag. “Believe me when I say that my interest in you is entirely unprofessional. It would be a severe breach of ethics for me to see you as a patient.”

To hear him voice it, felt good. He didn’t consider himself insecure, but after so many years of tepid professional curiosity, to have the words said out loud to him was... well, it was nice.

Will tipped back his head and sighed, rubbing his eyes beneath the frames of his spectacles. “Jack and Alana don’t seem to have gotten the memo.”

“I will break it to them when the time comes,” the doctor responded evenly.

Peering across at him, Will stretched a leg under his desk and pushed out the visitor seat with the toe of his shoe. “You can sit, if you want,” he relented with a wave of his hand.

Lecter obliged with a slanted smile and sat down in a single fluid motion, unbuttoning his suit jacket as he went. With all the grace of a house cat, he opened his lunch bag and began pulling out a pair of mugs and a thermos. “Are you amenable to coffee?”

“God, please,” Will replied.

He watched as Doctor Lecter went about unscrewing the lid of the thermos, a mist of steam rising up from the still hot contents. The coffee was a deep brown as he poured out equal portions into the mugs, the perfect amount for both of them. It filled the room with the smell of a coffee shop first thing in the morning, before the morning commuters bustled inside in droves.

“Sugar?”

“One, thank you.”

Out of the bag came a small pot of sugar and the teaspoon tinkled lightly against the ceramic as he stirred it in.

Will focussed on the careful, repetitive motions of the man’s wrist, before he tipped his head back and sighed unsteadily. “For some reason, I expected better from you,” he spoke lowly, plucking at a loose button on his jacket sleeve. “After... everything, I thought you— well, I wanted...”

It was too difficult to say his thoughts out loud.

Maybe expressing emotions was a skill, because he felt severely out of practise, like it was some rusted old spring that’d long oxidised and become brittle. It would snap if too much pressure was applied.

“Did my appearance today betray your trust in me?”

Will nodded numbly. “This might be a shocking revelation for you, but I don’t exactly have many friends,” he murmured, chewing at a hangnail. “Seeing you... realising why you were there... it – erm, it hurt.”

“Hence the less than warm welcome?” the man asked when Will looked up at him again.

There was a slide against the wood as Lecter pushed the cup to Will’s end of the desk.

“Yeah, hence the less than warm welcome,” he agreed, feeling the heat of the drink under his palms as he accepted the offering. “I’m not very nice on a good day, least of all after a nasty

surprise."

"Fear makes you rude."

Will pursed his lips and huffed a breath out of his nose.

He watched as Doctor Lecter moved aside a pile of student essays, placing down a pair of Tupperware boxes in their place. It was still weirdly surreal seeing him within the confines of Quantico, like finding a kazoo in a piano shop. Or assless chaps at a funeral home.

"I still can't believe you got involved with the BAU," Will said, craning his neck a little as the man took off one of the lids, revealing the sandwiches within. "How the hell did you manage to convince Jack to give you a role?"

Slyly narrowed eyes peered at him. "There was no convincing required. Agent Crawford approached me for himself."

"Ah, yes, because out of all the psychiatrists in a hundred mile radius, the head of the BAU just so happened to knock on your door."

The doctor set out two plates and went about cutting the sandwiches into diagonal halves, resting one portion propped up against the other. "It was a rather fortuitous coincidence," he said mildly, with the sort of tone that suggested that it hadn't, in fact, been a coincidence in the slightest.

"Coincidence my ass," Will muttered under his breath. "It was only last week you were trying to convince me that my work was damaging my health. What changed your mind and made you decide to join us instead?" Will asked as he sipped the coffee almost reverently.

God, it was good. It made the instant black coffee he usually chugged taste like sewage water by comparison.

The man glanced at him as he carefully drizzled a vinaigrette over the small side salad he'd packed along with the sandwiches. "My convictions remain unchanged," he said softly. "I think Jack is exploiting you and the display earlier today did little to change my mind. I certainly didn't ask them to keep my presence secret from you. When I was offered the chance to join the BAU, I thought it would be an opportunity to see the world through your eyes and I was unwilling to dismiss it."

"You could've at least warned me," Will muttered.

"I could've, you're correct. And perhaps I misstepped in my decision to not do so."

There was no remorse in his voice and when Will inspected him, he found none in his expression either. "You wanted to see how I'd react," he stated. "Didn't you?"

With a slight smile, Doctor Lecter portioned out the salad onto two plates and carefully wiped away any imperfections in the plating away with a clean napkin. "Yes," he said. "Although, I didn't expect quite such a negative reaction from you."

“You didn’t? After everything I’ve told you?”

The man’s lips pursed in contrition and Will couldn’t tell if it was genuine or for show. He was too damn difficult to read sometimes and while Will appreciated not constantly being bombarded by someone else’s emotions, he was flying blind.

“I understand your animosity towards psychiatrists, but I thought I would have the opportunity to speak with you about the arrangement prior to you discovering it. However, yet again, your ability to see through concealment leaves me quite out of my depth.”

“That is why they hire me,” Will pointed out.

“Yes, it is,” the doctor admitted. “If the idea of me working alongside you is too distressing, I’m happy to retract my agreement with Jack to allow us to continue our relationship as before.”

Will stared across at the food as he slowly slid the nearest plate closer to himself. “It’s... well. It’s not that I don’t think we’d work well together. I know we do. It’s, erm— it’s just, you’re my friend. I liked that our friendship was something private. It felt safe when it was just me and you, but uh— this complicates everything.”

Doctor Lecter was silent for a time. “Are you perhaps concerned that having outside observers will change the nature of our friendship?”

“Can you say that it definitely won’t?” Will responded, bouncing his leg up and down. “You used to be Alana’s mentor and Jack seems to respect you as an authority. I don’t want to be treated like your junior or your... I don’t know, your misbehaving patient that you have to keep on a leash.”

The man looked vaguely amused by the notion. “It doesn’t have to be that way. You are far more experienced in this line of work than I am. I am but a trembling novice in comparison to your track record.”

Will snorted despite himself. “Novice is the last word I would use to describe you. So what, you want to be buddy cops?”

“Or partners in crime if the desire should strike you,” the doctor said, elegantly picking up one of the sandwich’s two evenly divided triangles. “Perhaps we should have a— ah, what’s that delightful phrase? A good cop, bad cop routine?”

He let out a helpless laugh and pushed his glasses up his nose. “Fuck, well I’m afraid you’ll have to play good cop. I’ve already got the unpleasant asshole act down to a T.”

“But consider that we could swap at occasional intervals. That would certainly keep things interesting.”

Will’s shoulders continued to shudder with quiet laughter and he tugged his hair over his eyes. “For us maybe, but everyone else would get whiplash. I don’t think Jack would be pleased.”

The doctor's smile was broad and toothed and he eventually glanced back down to his plate. "Agent Crawford is not the reason I'm here, Will," he replied with a low tone. "You are."

There was an intensity and finality to the statement that Will didn't know how to handle. It sapped the mirth from his lips, but left him oddly full feeling, like the emotional equivalent of a three course dinner.

He didn't know how to respond, so he scratched at his chin instead.

"My compliments to the chef," he said, finally turning to the food.

The sandwich was a BLT, but it was quite far removed from the sad counterparts Will often found himself purchasing from gas stations. The bread was fresh and the lettuce crunched as he bit into it. The bacon was thick cut and perfectly cured, while the tomatoes were some of the most flavourful he'd ever tasted.

In essence, it was one of the best sandwhiches he'd ever eaten, certainly a darn sight better than the slightly soggy tuna mayo roll he would've scoffed down otherwise.

He chewed his mouthful slowly and swallowed, licking away the crumbs.

"I often use dry cuts of meat to gain the trust of strays," Will spoke thoughtfully. "It took three meat sticks to get Winston into my car."

Will took another large mouthful and watched with fascination as the man in front of him took even bites from his own sandwich, each time setting it back on the plate beside its counterpart, lined up hypotenuse to hypotenuse with perfect precision.

"Hunger is a universal experience," the doctor replied. "From the fungi waiting in the earth to devour our dead, to the creatures that hunt in dark waters, to the men that live in their little heated homes with microwave dinners, we are united by a need to consume."

Visiting the man's home the previous week had been an enlightening experience.

Hannibal Lecter was a man of eclectic taste with no regard for what was considered fashionable or proper. He lived in a personalised den of elegant decadence, hedonistic to the point of gluttony, only tempered by a strict desire for aesthetic order.

Every lamp, every chair, every odd trinket had been placed just *so*. Perfectly angled to catch the light. The colours were curated and precisely matched. Patterns and textures so odd they would've been garish anywhere else, had been artfully dispersed and arranged to draw out their unique appeal, like a musician plucking music from a cacophony of violin screeches.

He was a man who demanded beauty and excellence from all things he surrounded himself with.

Which begged the question of, well, why was he sat in Will's dingy office, as relaxed and at ease as he had been in his own home?

“Consumption is more than just about food,” Will finally replied, picking up a fork to spear a tomato and several green leaves. “It's about the will to live. But even when we’re civilised, when we don’t fear death anymore, consumption never leaves us. Its nature just shifts.”

“Maybe rather than the desire to simply survive, perhaps we begin to hunger for the exhilaration life can offer us instead.”

Will chewed the forkful of salad, finding it tangy and vibrant, with the edge of sting to the tip of his tongue. “Is that what you hunger for, Doctor? The feeling of being alive?”

The man’s eyelashes fluttered and his teeth flashed briefly as he ate. Shoulders straight and dressed to the nines, everything about him was the perfect vision of class, but Will couldn’t help but see something ferocious sitting just beneath the surface.

When Lecter raised his gaze, it was dark.

Despite all the trappings of civility, the choreographed pleasantries he put on for Jack and the rest of the world, his eyes betrayed him. They reminded Will of the eyes of a starving animal, ravenous and almost misted with a malnourished need to devour, but sharp enough to cut though ligaments and bone.

The man swallowed and wiped a crumb from the corner of his mouth with his thumb. “I find it difficult to distil my desires down to something so easily summarised,” he spoke softly. Will knew evasion when he saw it.

He wanted to know what made Doctor Lecter *tick*.

Will was unsettled by the pull he felt towards the psychiatrist. Every time they met, it was as if an invisible cord between them tightened just a little. Their gravities had fallen within the other’s range, pulling them into an evitable free fall that could only ever end in a collision.

Maybe he could still escape it if he tried. Maybe it wasn’t too late to untangle them just yet.

Soon it would be impossible, he knew.

Why couldn’t he bring himself to move away?

In the past, his ability to open people up and gaze into their depths had been a useful, if painful, tool. A double ended blade. However, this man resisted his usual open perusal and being denied the knowledge he usually resented seemed to only make Will want to understand him more. For the first time, he found himself gripping onto the thorned handle of his perception with an iron fast grip, careless of the blood running down his wrist as he fought to pry Lecter’s chest open.

It was a kind of madness.

Folie à deux.

“Perhaps its futile to attempt to gauge the width and breadth of a mind in its entirety,” Will murmured.

“I believe they’re better viewed as art rather than a series of solvable equations. Rather than numbers and variables, they are paint strokes and pigments built up over a lifetime of events. Your ability allows you to wander through the galleries of people’s brains, does it not?”

Will continued to find the Doctor’s observations flaying, like a fish being descaled just before it was placed in the pan to fry. “Most of minds I see are made up of bland and unimaginative motifs. The strokes differ, but the messages remain largely the same. What painting am I, do you think?”

Lecter ignored his food for a time, his focus instead resolutely pinned upon Will.

He reached across the desk and rested a hand on Will’s clothed wrist, the weight of his palm still exquisitely enveloping. “What you are hasn’t yet been given a name. Perhaps the critics of the world sneer at it now, but their ignorance will be their downfall.”

“An acquired taste, then?” Will responded, unable to think about anything but that damnable hand. Lecter’s fingers were barely a hair width away from the exposed skin of his wrist, but they didn’t touch, they didn’t even *brush*.

“Yes, but it’s quite an addictive one once appreciated,” the man said, patting his sleeve twice and withdrawing as if he’d never been there in the first place.

But the pressure still remained imposed on Will’s skin, even after the sensation faded.

“What kind of painting are you?” he returned, flexing his digits.

“I spent my formative years gazing up at Botticelli’s Primavera, so it could have early renaissance influences. Although, perhaps the resemblance is only visible from a distance,” Lecter spoke, continuing to eat with a methodical slowness, pausing to deliberate over each mouthful.

“There’s a rope barrier between the viewers and the frame, isn’t there? A guarded masterpiece too precious to be left within arm’s reach,” Will said, as he finished off the first half of his sandwich. “What would happen if someone stepped closer than permitted, I wonder. What would they find in the details of your brush strokes?”

The doctor’s smile was slight, but genuine. “That would depend on the observer. A member of the public with no desire but to prod and soil the paint work with their oily fingerprints would see nothing but the wrath of the gallery’s owner, but someone with an eye for art? Well, the details are up to interpretation.”

What was this?

An invitation?

A challenge?

“Maybe I should step over the barrier myself,” he suggested.

“I believe you already have,” came the faint reply.

Not knowing how to respond, Will stayed quiet.

He finished off the second half of his sandwich and sipped his coffee until the caffeine began to revive him, while his lunch-mate made slower work of the food.

Their peace didn't remain, however.

Will heard thundering footsteps coming down the corridor and braced himself, setting down his cup and pursing his lips. Doctor Lecter turned to him with a curious glance, so he just grimaced.

"Incoming," he warned.

Ten seconds later the door smacked against the wall as Jack pushed inside with no regard for the paintwork. His mouth opened to speak, but then his eyes landed on Doctor Lecter and he stopped. Looking at Will, he seemed to try to make sense of the picture before him, his frown only growing more pronounced when he noticed the small picnic laid out across the desk.

"Doctor Lecter, I wasn't aware you were still here," he said slowly.

The psychiatrist put on a diplomatic smile, producing a napkin as he dabbed at an imaginary stain on his chin. "Hello Agent. Will and I were having a spot of lunch actually. Is everything quite alright?"

Jack's bafflement only intensified as he glanced at Will questioningly, searching for an explanation but clearly not finding one. "I... yes," he grunted, before clearing his throat and composing himself. "I just received a call from the MPD. It looks like they've got a case they want eyes on in Washington DC, but if we want the scene undisturbed, we need to get moving now. Will you be joining us, Doctor?"

The assumption that Will would be going regardless rankled a bit on his nerves, but he kept the tick of annoyance close to his chest.

He was surprised when the doctor turned to him. "Would you like me to join you?" he asked.

The answer came easier than expected.

Regardless of Will's initial reaction, the psychiatrist had successfully wriggled his way back into his good books with shocking ease. He was still justifiably angry, but the spike of his fury had been softened by food and conversation into something a bit more rationally minded.

Doctor Lecter was his friend, the only person alive that'd taken the time to try to know him, to see him, to accept him for what he was. Even if he had weaselled his way into the BAU under the false pretence of profiling Will for Jack's benefit, he couldn't find it in himself to stay bitter.

Will sighed. "Yes. Sure, come along if you really want."

“In that case,” Doctor Lecter said, raising his head, “I would be delighted to see the FBI at work. I’m certain it will be very informative.”

With a cheerful gleam to his eyes, Lecter began to clear up their mostly empty dishes, while Jack gazed on in silent bafflement.

Chapter End Notes

Hello and thank you for reading! As always, I love hearing your thoughts.

Hannibal is having a great time this chapter. A trip to Quantico, a meal with Will and a crime scene all in one day? It's practically Christmas come early.

In Which a Hawk Hunts

Chapter Notes

Chapter Warning: Graphic descriptions of corpses.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The bare concrete was pale like exposed bone, hungrily pulling moisture into itself. Maybe the blood that covered it had shone and glistened against the wall when fingers had first smeared it there, but now it was dry and flat, a dirty crimson stain.

More blood had pooled on the ground, forming a coagulated, tacky puddle, trickling down from the morbid mural and seeping from the mutilated remains of the man that sat crumpled against the wall.

The only illumination in the bare room was from an exposed bulb overhead and a single shaft of light that came pouring through a unfinished hole of a window, harsh and acrid on his already aching eyeballs.

“Do we have a positive ID on the victim?” Will asked as he slipped on a pair of blue gloves and stepped closer, resisting the urge to *touch*.

The victim, a middle aged man in tattered office wear was slumped unceremoniously in the remnants of his last moments, head hanging forward as one might kneel in prayer. A previously white shirt was stained brown from old blood, the remains of his stomach slashed, stabbed and torn like the work of a wild animal with too many teeth and claws.

Great red wings stretched from his back, his blood the paint that made each seeping brushstroke against the concrete and detailed each fine tipped feather. They were broad, powerful wings, dwarfing the small, broken figure at their base.

His death gave them their life. A hollowed seed abandoned by its blossom.

Jack cleared his throat, distracting Will from his observations. “The MPD found a wallet in his pocket when first investigating the scene. Meet the late Colin Sparrow.”

“Quite a fitting name, given the unfortunate circumstances,” Doctor Lecter said from where he stood to the side of the doorway to avoid the tidal comings and goings of FBI personnel. He seemed remarkably unbothered by the grisly scene, but remained quiet and unobtrusive as if to blend in with the background.

Will hummed and he sunk into a crouch to get a closer look at the corpse. “Well, I doubt that was much of a coincidence.”

The body's fingers were curled and stiff on the floor, pale and almost waxy looking.

It wasn't fresh like the Ripper's last killing and it lacked the care and presentation of the esteemed artist's other works, leaving the corpse limp and slowly putrefying with every minute it spent outside of a fridge.

It was a pitiful attempt at art, the work of a beginner, an amateur.

"He died overnight, right?" Will said, raising his head. "The body is in full rigor."

Jack was holding a clipboard and he flipped over a page. "Initial estimates put the time of death between 7pm, when the construction workers left the site, to 6am when the foreman arrived and found the delivery entrance unlocked. But realistically, I think we're looking at between 8pm to 2am."

Will frowned. "Why wasn't the security breach reported first thing?"

The agent glanced at him with a long exasperated blink, his lips pursed tight. "Apparently it wasn't a concern," he said stiffly, throwing a look towards the room's entrance. "The padlock was known to be faulty, so site management overlooked it. The body was found at about 11am by an electrician working in this part of the build and the police department arrived shortly after midday."

Leaning forward, knuckle pressed to a clean patch of concrete, Will peered at the bottom of the victim's dress shoes. "And how much do we know about Mr Sparrow?" he asked, craning his head to the side.

"He was an attorney at a local law firm. A couple of the MPD's detective's are currently interviewing his contacts."

There were flecks of blood, sand and soil ground into the nooks and crevices of the sole, even marking the otherwise shining leather at the tip of the toes.

"Is the firm within walking distance?"

"We haven't been given an address," Jack replied. "The notes are currently incomplete."

Will straightened to his feet with a small grunt. "Well, could you ask around while I do my thing? I've got a hunch about what happened."

Jack nodded and tucked the clipboard under his arm, clapping his hands together once. "Alright, everyone! Time to clear out."

At his call, the forensics team snapped to attention, halted what they were doing and began shuffling their way out. Jack headed to the door and gestured for the doctor to follow him. "Come along, Doctor Lecter. Will needs his space."

The psychiatrist looked from Jack to Will, his face calm but his eyebrows raised slightly in a silent question. Will met his eyes and nodded for him to go, earning a small, slanted smile for his trouble.

“Ah, of course,” Lecter replied, ducking his head. “Do lead the way.”

With that, he and Jack left him all alone in the bare, half finished room. Will backed several paces away from the corpse so he could take in the full breadth of those crimson wings, now alone to appreciate their form.

A bird in mid flight.

Outside, the building site turned crime scene was alive with witnesses and local and federal law enforcement, voices raised and machinery still thrumming. But in that concrete room, Will was separate from all the chaos, everything somehow dialled down to something more manageable, more mundane.

He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and allowed the pendulum to swing.

First, the sky became blue and then black. The light bulb dimmed. What had become dry began to glisten and drip once again.

And then with each breath, each swing, the blood peeled away from concrete, a torn shirt knotted itself back together, and the unfinished room became empty again.

The sound of the crime scene turned to silence.

He opened his eyes.

The sky was dark with the deep red glow of night-time poisoned by urban light pollution. The air was cold and still, the street devoid of sound apart from the steady thud of his footsteps as he walked. It was an industrial area, all grey high rise offices from the 1960s and nondescript industrial constructions, the windows dim from the fleeing of the 9-5 work crowd. Streetlights were few and far between, each illuminating a solitary patch of side walk with nothing but shadows consuming all that remained.

He prowled with the slow assured pace of a hunter, eyes trained ahead and ears pricked for the slightest noise. An excited tension held his muscles taut, but his heart rate was calm with the dreadful certainty of someone that’d been planning this for a long, long time.

A knife weighed in his pocket, solid through the fabric of his gloves as he turned it over idly in his hand.

Tonight he would get to use it.

His creeping footsteps plunged him back into the darkness, a gaping chasm opening up in the rift between two buildings. The access road was thin and unlit and he paused at its mouth to stare down into the depths.

Just then, he heard it.

A light scuff of shoes against tarmac, the whine of metal grating against metal up ahead.

There you are, the killer thought. *Scurry away all you like, but I've found you now.*

Turning away from the main street, he followed the noise into the dark. He made no deliberate effort to conceal his strides, but they were soft against the harsh stillness of the empty place. A large metal gate caught his eye, a chain hanging loose from its rungs, the padlock unlatched. As he paused, the chain swung ever so slightly.

There was no breeze tonight.

Reaching out, he pushed the gate open enough to slip through and closed it behind him.

The construction site lay out before him. Mud, concrete and machinery cast large shapes in the gloom, several dim flood lights illuminating the bare bones of a building on the far side. The chaos of materials gave his prey so many places to hide, but with high fences and hours before dawn, he knew that the only person that would leave this place was him.

He cast his eyes over the darkness, listening and watching for the slightest sign of life.

Where are you?

Will opened his eyes with a sharp intake of air, taking a half step back to steady himself. The daylight suddenly seemed too bright, the sounds too loud, the smell of iron too thick.

His shoulders met bare wall behind him and he stayed there for several seconds, breathing in and out slowly to regain his sense of reality and blinking to clear the coloured dots flooding his vision. His headache was worse than before and he itched to take another aspirin. After several moments, things began to crystallise back into focus and the jelly in his knees solidified into something just steady enough to stand on.

"This is my design," he whispered.

Will gazed at the red wings one final time, before wetting his dry lips and shuffling towards the exit.

His hands still shook with the thrill of the hunt.

Ducking beneath the police tape, he went in search of the others. Through the bare skeleton of the building he went. And ducking beneath the crisscrossing network of scaffolding into the open air, he was met by a flowing crowd of onlookers. In among the FBI uniforms was the dark blue of MPD officers and then the high vis vests of the confused construction workers giving their statements.

The voices were a cacophony of noise as he looked around in search of familiar faces. Everywhere was a new emotion painted into the lines of grim figures, and they hit him like a truck.

Fear was the most prominent one. Fear of the monsters lurking in the night. Fear of financial ruin. All undercut by the general nervousness people tended to be struck by at the mere sight of federal law enforcement.

And then there was the anger. Frustration, tinged with bitterness. That eagering sense of restlessness.

It was all coloured with streaks of guilt, the curdling sweetness of curiosity and the pungent bite of loathing.

Will blinked as his headache intensified and he stared at the ground for a moment of reprieve. His mind was too fresh, too raw and tender, like the delicate, pink skin found beneath a healing scab pulled too soon.

Needing desperately to find the others, he raised his eyes again, scanning the heads for the sight of something familiar.

Doctor Lecter met his eyes across the churning throng.

The sight of him was like a sudden hush, the pause of a film or that moment in the night when the wind stops blowing for a single second. In the chaos, the man was like a lighthouse, perfectly calm and at ease, and Will allowed himself to breathe again as that emotionless visage swept cold silence through the previously bustling halls of his crowded mind.

Slowly, the stone of the psychiatrist's face shifted as he beckoned Will over, but the underlying emotion remained distant. A whisper in a sea of screaming voices.

"Will," the man greeted softly, nodding his head as he joined the small group.

"Will, what do you have for us?" Jack interjected, interrupting that small moment of reprieve.

He gave himself a second to compose himself, where he glanced around to the two MPD officers that'd been talking a moment ago and the slightly frustrated bent to Katz's shoulders.

"Well, off the bat, it's pretty clear that the killing was premeditated," Will began.

Before he could continue, one of the inspectors scoffed and shook his head. "We could've told you that," he said with a sneer. "A guy called Sparrow turns up dead by a blood mural of wings. It's obviously a humiliation tactic."

Jack's jaw ticked as he glanced at Will and nodded for him to continue.

He cleared his throat. "As I was saying, the killer was organised and likely planned the act in advance. However, the patterns of violence aren't indicative of a personal motivation. This was the work of an opportunist, not a close contact."

“Is there anything else? Anything that could help us track this killer down?” Jack asked.

Will pursed his lips, inspecting Doctor Lecter’s pristine leather shoes compared to his more battered ones.

“There’s a second crime scene,” he said to the small group, barely raising his head. “The victim was already injured by the time he got into that room. It’ll be somewhere onsite, near a source of sand. If I’m correct, there will be signs of a struggle, maybe even a discarded jacket.”

It’d been cold the previous night, so he doubted the victim had gone outside without a second layer.

“We’ve already done rounds of the place and we didn’t see anything,” the local inspector replied, watching Will with a clenched jaw.

Will, already tired and emotionally wrung out like a thrice used tissue, leant towards him, eyes fixed on his chin. “Well, I suggest you look *again*,” he bit out.

The man opened his mouth, taking a step forward. “Hey, listen *here* you—”

Jack held up a hand. “Inspector Malcom, none of that, thank you,” he said. “Since the MPD wants to remain on the case, the least you can do is send out your officers.”

With a scoff, the officer backed down, throwing his hands in the air. “Sure, whatever,” he muttered as he skulked away with his partner in tow. “Fucking Feds tellin’ us how to do our jobs.”

Less than ten minutes later, there was a yell from the far side of the site.

A blood splatter had been found.

Will looked around at the area, noting the footprints pressed into the soft ground. Unfortunately the workers had disrupted the picture in the hours since dawn with their own tracks, but he could still just about pick apart the scene from what remained. “The dress shoe imprints are from the victim. But... see that set there?” He pointed to another set, the prints too sleek to be from boots, but too defined with grips to be formal shoes. Sneakers, maybe. “That’s from our man. If he’s smart, which I suspect he is, he probably disposed of the shoes first chance he got.”

Price paused from taking photographs to lay down a scale beside the print Will had gestured to. “29cm, so about a size 11,” he replied, before cracking a smile. “Well, that rules out bigfoot.”

“Could be his cousin, actually-fairly-averagefoot,” Zeller added.

Katz made a disgusted noise from the other side of the sand pile, throwing the pair an exasperated look. “Seriously guys?”

Doctor Lecter joined Will, leaning forward a little to peer around his shoulder.

“What story do the prints tell?” he asked softly.

Will peeled off his gloves so he could shove his hands into his pockets, warming them against his thighs. “The victim was crouched out of sight at first, but the killer snuck up on him from behind and attacked. You can see there where the prints are indented by the blood splatter. They scuffled a bit, the victim ran away, and the killer pursued.”

“A tale as old as life itself,” Lecter mused. “But what was the author’s intent? A spectacle intended for an audience, or simply the tapping of monkeys on typewriters?”

Will glanced at him, finding dark eyes watching him as a rapt spectator. The man stood closer to him than most dared, forming a pair from two separates against the tide of faceless, nameless noise.

“These aren’t just the leftovers,” he replied after a moment of thought. “The body is the point, a message, a proclamation, perhaps. I just don’t know what that message is. He didn’t wet his hands with blood to feel its warmth, he did it to create an image to be seen.”

“An artist then?”

He scowled at the suggestion. “No, I wouldn’t give him that much credit. He’s a hobbyist at best.”

Lecter smiled across at him, his expression oddly charmed. With blood splashed less than a couple metres away, the smile was out of place in amongst the horror and violence, but Will found himself hesitantly returning it anyway.

It took several more hours for things to wrap up in Washington.

By the time they set off back to Quantico, the sky was dark.

Will considered that there were few thing more awkward than being trapped in a confined space for the best part of an hour with your boss and a man whose cushions you’d recently drooled over.

The three men sat in a stilted silence as they followed the small convoy of FBI vehicles on the I- 95, southbound back to Quantico. Jack was at the wheel, while Will and the doctor sat in the back seats. As the traffic built to a grinding roll with the evening rush hour, Jack made a frustrated noise and tapped his fingers against the wheel.

“Do you two mind if I put on the radio?” he asked after a few more agonising minutes of honking horns and flashing brake lights.

“I have no objections,” Lecter supplied.

“Sure, go ahead,” Will said, closing his eyes and pressing his cheek to the glass. His headache was still present just behind his eyeballs but milder than the drumming pain it’d been earlier. The cold against his face helped. The exhaustion of the day was beginning to sink in and he longed for the sweet embrace of bed.

The radio came to life and the car was immediately filled with the twinkly chimes of an overly saccharine Christmas tune.

‘*Jingle bell, jingle bell, jingle bell rock,*

Jingle bells swing and jingle bells ring—'

Jack grunted under his breath and changed channel, only for another, slightly more grating Christmas song to come on.

‘*It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas,*

Everywhere you go—'

He changed the channel several more times with similar results.

‘*Oh, baby, all I want for Christmas is you,*

You, baby...’

“For God’s sake,” Jack muttered to himself, fiddling with his wedding band in irritation. “Is it really necessary for *every* station go Christmas crazy?”

“How else will they sell us overpriced Christmas themed jumpers, mugs and coffees for a whole month?” Will muttered, hunkering down in his seat to get more comfortable. “Pure marketing.”

In the rear-view mirror he caught sight of Jack’s deepening frown and the way his eyes went distant for a moment as he stared straight ahead.

There was pain there, one that made Will pause and observe more closely.

With Bella Crawford’s grim prognosis, he wondered if this Christmas would be the last Jack would get with her. Maybe his reaction was less his annoyance with cheesy festive jingles, but rather a flinch reflex to the painful thoughts the time of year brought with it. A complex grief expressed through anger.

“91.5 FM is a classical station,” Doctor Lecter suggested, leaning forward. “It should prove to be a little less festive.”

“Thank you, Doctor.” Jack fiddled with the dial and soon Mariah Carey’s vocals were overtaken by the smooth whine of string and wind instruments. “Ah, that’s better.”

Will slid his phone out of his jacket and tapped out a quick message.

Will [14:02]: Let me guess, 91.5 FM is your go to station.

There was a soft, almost noiseless buzz from the Doctor's pocket and Will watched the man gracefully pluck the device out and check the notification. His password was ridiculously over complicated, a series of long and short elegant taps against the pristine screen. Will noted the way Lecter held his phone aloft and viewed the screen up close with his chin dipped down just a little, leaving him with a slight double chin that didn't humanise him nearly as much as it should've.

The man's lips twitched minutely as he typed out a swift response.

Doctor Lecter [14:04]: Am I quite so predictable?

Will [14:06]: You offered me opera recommendations. It's hardly much of an intuitive leap.

Doctor Lecter [14:07]: No rest for that dagger sharp mind of yours. How us intruders must bounce so noisily around the bone arena of your skull.

It was possibly the most ridiculous text message he'd ever received.

He stifled a snort.

Will [14:08]: Bounce? Why, Doctor Lecter, you practically saunter your way around it. Leaving your fingerprints all over the furnishings.

The psychiatrist breathed in audibly, practically a laugh in the stony quiet of the journey.

Doctor Lecter [14:10]: How rude of me. I do hope I left my shoes at the entrance, at least.

Will [14:12]: Ah, no, you're not that considerate. You leave your fair share of footprints as well. Maybe next time hang up your jacket by the door.

Will turned off the screen and slid it away again.

He could feel eyes press into his skin and he did a poor job of concealing his barely contained grin.

When they reached Quantico, the trio were quick to split with minimal fanfare. For reasons unbeknownst to Will, he walked Doctor Lecter to his Bentley, despite his own car being on the other side of the parking lot.

"I enjoyed working with you, Will," the doctor said as he fished out his keys. "I look forward to making a habit of it."

Hands shoved deep into his pockets, Will shifted his weight from foot to foot. He opened his mouth to reply, but the words died on his lips and he swallowed their remains.

He cleared his throat and tried again. "I, uh— liked it. Today. More than I usually do, anyway," he admitted. "Well, everything after lunch..."

Lecter glanced back at him as he placed his bag in the back seat. “You find blood more tolerable than indignity,” he stated softly. “I don’t blame you.”

“I do prefer it when the knife isn’t cutting me,” Will stated, internally cringing at the memory of the meeting, the agonising heat of his ears and the shaking of his voice. “Less personal that way.”

Dull with sleep and limbs heavy with exhaustion, Will’s eyes slid open, just a touch. Eyelashes blurred his vision, the early morning light still soft as it seeped through the curtains. He could make out the shapes of his dogs as they lay in their beds beside the exstinguished hearth. The clock ticked gently.

Everything was still.

Everything was quiet.

Sleep tugged Will back under for a minute, a long blink where he wasn’t sure just how much time had passed. But when he opened his eyes again, something was different.

Wrong.

It took him a moment, but then his eyes snapped to one of the armchairs, where a large, dark figure sat perfectly still.

Will drew in a breath, eyes widening at the sight of thin claws and spindly antlers. They curved and stretched towards the ceiling, each branch coming to a deadly point stained with something red. The creature’s skin was so dark it shone blue in the weak light and at the sound of Will’s gasp its head slowly turned to stare at him with eyes so pale they looked almost like pearls.

They were familiar eyes, somehow.

“Why are you following me?” Will asked the Ripper, his voice hoarse with the remnants of sleep.

The clawed monster watched him, face unmoving, muscles untwitching. It almost could’ve been mistaken for a statue, but he knew better.

Slowly, it cocked its head to one side, as if considering him.

“What do you want from me?” he whispered.

His heartbeats and breaths came slow to him. Strangely, he felt no panic, but his eyes were fixed to the creature, unable to look away.

The spell was broken by a buzz of his phone. And in the blink of an eye the creature disappeared from sight, leaving the room empty and untouched. As if it'd never been there at all.

Will scrambled to sit upright, broken from his trance, fighting the blankets to free himself from their grip. As wakefulness descended upon him, his hands shook and he swallowed thickly.

Reaching for his phone, he stared at the notification.

Doctor Lecter [05:37]: Good morning, Will. I apologise for messaging you at such an unsocial hour, however a patient of mine has cancelled their evening appointment for later today. If you're available and amenable, I was wondering if perhaps you'd like to visit my office and discuss the case over a glass of wine?

Will held the phone in one hand as he rubbed his eyes with the other. He set it back down with a clack and collapsed back into the covers, eyes sliding shut against the weight of lethargy. Laying there he tried to ignore the inevitability of the oncoming day.

Eventually something wet prodded his elbow, a long tongue lapping at his arm. Will let out a small groan and finally dragged himself firmly into the waking world.

Ellie was stood at the edge of the bed, pawing at the mattress. Her tail began to wag as he peered down at her.

"Morning, sweetheart," he cooed, leaning over and scratching behind her ear as she wagged her tail and sniffed at his arm. "Who's my lovely girl? Do you want to go outside?"

Ellie's ear perked up at the word and she made a soft woof noise, stomping her paws against the floorboards. The wagging intensified.

Smiling, Will wrapped himself in his blanket and shuffled over to the front door. By the time he got there, a few more members of the pack had perked up their heads and joined the furry mass of wiggling bodies surrounding his legs.

"Hey, hey, easy guys," he scolded as he unlocked the front door and released his pack upon the frosted landscape beyond.

The cold gust of air that flooded in attacked his naked ankles and bare toes. He shivered a bit and retreated back inside, begrudgingly beginning his routine to begin the day.

As he trekked towards the kitchen, he eyed his phone where it lay on his bedside table, a light still flashing with a reminder of the Doctor's message. A frown pinched at his lips.

Will had never liked having a phone, a constant chain-like tether that bound him to society's whims. All it did was sit as a weight in his pocket, bulky, ungainly and inescapable. He didn't care that the headphone jack didn't work properly anymore and he'd just sniffed when the screen had cracked after he'd dropped it one too many times.

He just didn't like it.

And yet he found himself drawn to it nowadays. The chime of a notification that at one time had filled him with dread was now accompanied by the thrill of excitement.

For many years, the prospect of a phone call made him twitch and fidget, chest tight with consuming anxiety. But in that moment, he picked up his phone as he wondered into the kitchen to begin breakfast, flicking through the contact list and pressing 'call' with a foreign sense of ease.

As the phone rang, he waited.

For so long he'd revelled in his quiet mornings, one of the few times in the day he was certain of his own solitude. So why did he seek out company, if only through the tinny connection of a phone line?

"*Good morning, Will*," the doctor said, sounding far too awake for so early in the morning. "*What a pleasant surprise."*

There it was, that flicker of something warm in his chest, that feeling both alien and familiar. It scratched an itch at the base of his skull.

"Yes, well," Will placed his phone down on the counter as he went about cleaning the dog bowls. "I heard you were looking to drink on the FBI's dime."

They'd had their fair share of phone calls in their short acquaintance, and he wondered if the growing habit would one day form an addiction. A burning need for these small slices of someone else's life as they bisected this own.

"*What better way is there to spend an evening? I'll be sure to not include the wine as a business expense if that's your concern. I can assure you it'll be better than the standard FBI fare*."

Will snorted under his breath, scrubbing leftover dirt and food from the surface of the metal bowls with a scouring pad. "Had a bad run in with the office coffee machine, did you?"

He heard what sounded like the steady clink of cutlery. Perhaps he'd interrupted the man's breakfast. Served him right for messaging Will at the crack of dawn.

"*Coffee is a generous description of what was served to me.*"

Will rolled his eyes to himself, patting the bowls dry and individually scooping out the correct meal size for each dog into their corresponding bowl. He had a separate mix for Ellie and Jack prepared to one side, specially made to support the dogs in their twilight years of life.

He had a strong suspicion that somewhere within the halls of Quantico, a cup of untouched coffee had been sneakily left to go cold. "It's not that bad," Will protested, sliding a couple slices of bread into the toaster for himself. "It's just about drinkable when you're two days into overtime for a case."

What was the doctor eating that morning, he wondered? Maybe it was more protein scramble, though he suspected the man rarely repeated his meals. A glutton for variety.

"*Ah, perhaps I was missing the prerequisite sleep deprivation to make it bearable then. Generally I prefer my coffee to not taste of char, I'll admit*."

"I happen to like black coffee," Will replied as he set the bowls down in their assigned places, keeping an eye on his pack as they began to eat. "Nothing wrong with a dark roast."

There was a noise from the speaker, almost a huff but too swift and too cheery to be a sigh. Will had the feeling the doctor was amused by the line of conversation. A scoff, then. "*Dark roast black coffee, quite the classic*," the man spoke, pausing momentarily, assumedly to take another mouthful. "*Although, I question if you truly do drink it for pleasure or rather because its the kind of coffee someone like you is expected to drink*."

"Coffee has stereotypes now, does it?"

"*Does it not? Black coffee has long been associated with stoicism, tradition and dedication to ones work. The irony being, of course, that dark coffee doesn't equate to a higher caffeine concentration. More bitterness for less reward*."

"Maybe I like the bitterness," Will replied reflexively, wincing as he touched the too hot toast as he fished it out of the toaster.

Lecter made a considerate noise, a teacup bumping a porcelain plate and invisible lips taking a small sip. "*I won't deny you your preferences, but I ask that you question them for yourself. I've made you light roast coffee before, so ask yourself, which was it that you enjoyed more? Is it truly the bitter tang of your midnight fuel that you crave, or have you simply resigned yourself to the life of a man who suffers for little reward?*"

The words hurt in the way a whip did, a hot slash against the skin that felt as if it'd torn his skin asunder but left his flesh unmarked.

Will stood still in his kitchen, hands braced on the counter top as he looked over at his phone and the numbers slowly ticking upwards as their call grew ever longer. Alone and unseen, he allowed his head to dip and he swallowed hard, to push down the noise that wanted to be freed. A hysterical laugh perhaps, maybe a sob.

He blinked to himself and reached for a butter knife. "I sometimes think it's all I'm good for," he said softly to himself.

He wondered if the doctor heard him.

"Are you looking to tempt me into your lifestyle of decadence, Doctor Lecter?" Will asked, embarrassed to hear the slight rasp to his voice.

"*Of course*," was the easy reply, followed by a satisfied sigh and the final click of cutlery being placed at the centre of a finished dish. "*Next time we breakfast together face to face, I*

shall have to make you coffee again. Perhaps we can find something for you to delight in rather than tolerate. So, are you free this evening?"

Will's cheeks warmed at the suggestion of their next breakfast, as if it was a sure thing. As if this strange, spiralling set of circumstances between them could one day form familiarity and the surety of a *next time*.

"As long as Jack doesn't have anything for me, I could be done at Quantico by 5pm, have dinner and let the dogs out by 6pm and be to Baltimore for about 7.30pm," he replied, taking a bite of his slightly overdone toast, mechanically chewing and finally swallowing. "Does that work for you?"

"*Yes, that is ideal, in fact. Do you still have my card? It has my office's address on it.*"

"Uh, it's about somewhere. I'm sure I can dig it out," he said. Somewhere, as it happened, was the inside of his wallet, tucked behind the Walgreens membership card he used when buying dog medicine.

"*Excellent*," the psychiatrist said. "*Murder and mayhem notwithstanding, I will see you then*."

"Yes, I'll see you then."

The day was a blur of lessons, meetings and report readings, punctuated by the ping of Jack's emails, each asking for a new update on their steadily mounting number of active cases. Will soon found himself in Baltimore, at the bottom step of an imposing building, exactly the kind of place he imagined Hannibal Lecter lurking during the day.

As he walked up the short flight of steps, he was overly aware of the fact that his hair was still slightly damp from the rushed shower he'd had before coming over. He didn't usually shower more than once a day, but for some reason the idea of rocking up to Doctor Lecter's smelling of death and rot made him break routine.

The entrance was unlocked and he stepped into a small waiting room.

It seemed to serve as a miniature art gallery and overflow library more than anything else. The chairs were an after thought, propped up against the one piece of undecorated wall available. The paintings themselves varied, from old portraiture of long dead women with dainty features, to depictions of hanging men cast beside storming oceans. Not the typical clinically calm aesthetic most therapists employed, by any means.

He didn't have time to consider the book titles before the door opened and Doctor Lecter nodded his head in greeting.

"Good evening, Will. I'm glad to see you looking well," he said, stepping back to usher him inside.

“Hello, Doctor,” he replied as he entered the office. “Jack hasn’t yet succeeded in running me into the ground.”

Office was an understatement, a pitiful title that didn’t fit the room’s true nature. It was a grand hall, a stage set with pillars and arches and intricate sliding ladders. Grand red curtains lined the now darkened windows, currently pulled across to hide them from passing eyes. The raised mezzanine he imagined as a platform for the clamouring audience to peer at the stage from, cluttered with orderly files and curious trinkets.

The two chairs sat at centre stage. Austere and precisely arranged, they drew the eyes like expertly crafted props.

It wasn’t like any therapist office he’d ever stepped into before.

“Despite his best efforts I imagine,” Lecter said, flashing him a slight smile as he crossed the room to where a pair of glasses sat beside a bottle of wine on a grand antique desk.

“He doesn’t intend to, it’s just the natural result of his actions,” Will sighed, taking his glasses off as they fogged at the sudden shift from cold to warmth. The fireplace in the corner of the room was blazing and the air was just on the hot side of comfortable.

Picking up the bottle, the doctor poured out two glasses of wine so dark it looked almost purple under the evening dimmed lights. “Reality cares little for intent,” Lecter reminded him, carefully picking the glasses up and holding one out for Will. “A good deed can be committed with the very worst of intentions, and a bad one can be committed with the best.”

“What shade of grey is Jack’s intent?” Will said as he accepted the offering.

“Likely darker than he realises,” the man replied, raising his drink in a small toast. “As Virgil once said, ‘facilis descensus Averno’.”

The strike of glass on glass was pure and light, and Will smiled at the other man over the rim, meeting his dark eyes.

They both sipped their drinks, a deep red that was both sweet and heavy on his tongue. Will rolled the taste around his mouth to test it, to understand it. He’d never been a huge fan of wine, but for this, he made an exception.

“I suppose we’re all going to hell in the end,” Will contemplated. “I’m certainly not god-fearing enough to go anywhere else.”

Lecter sunk down into his chair, crossing his legs with that light flourish he always carried himself with. His suit was brown checkers that night, shirt a very pale pink, matched with a floral, fuchsia tie.

Vanity definitely seemed like a sin of his.

“I don’t fear anyone. But, if I am to burn for eternity, I should hope that the journey there be fun,” Doctor Lecter said, resting the glass on his knee, “or at least interesting.”

Will laughed, turning his head away to keep the pleasure secreted away, but when he realised what he was doing, he forced his shoulders to relax. Lecter rested his chin on his hand and tilted his head as he regarded him. There was a soft delight to the crinkle of his eyes, a quietly pleased curve to his lips.

Will discovered that he enjoyed it when the man looked at him like that.

The longer the look lingered, the hotter it felt on his skin.

It wasn't uncomfortable in the same way staring usually was. Instead of needles pressing into his skin, it laid on him like liquid caramel, saccharine and sticky and difficult to remove, yet so delightful in taste.

He just wasn't sure how to consume so much sweetness at once, so he cleared his throat.

"There's plenty to be interested by," he remarked.

That broke the tension, the psychiatrist taking another sip as he nodded. "Ah, yes, our little painter friend. Have there been any major developments?"

Will placed his drink down.

From his bag, he retrieved a manila folder, setting it on the desk and laying it out. "Nothing huge. While we don't have any strong suspects yet, we've dug up a lot of useful information in the meantime. We've ruled out most of the victim's friends, family and co-workers, and from what we can tell Mr Sparrow didn't have any enemies."

"A stranger then?" came the question.

"Yes, that's my hunch. Maybe the perp made contact with the victim prior to that night, but it wouldn't have been in any meaningful way."

The man tapped his knuckle against the arm of his chair, before leaning forward to inspect the reports and photographs before him. "How callous," he murmured. "Does he care about the person he killed, or is their life merely incidental?"

"I don't think he really saw his victim as a person," Will spoke as Lecter rooted through the swiftly thickening file. "While generally killers do dehumanise their victims, often this is done as a way to separate themselves from the fray, a way to dominate and prove themselves greater than the people they kill. But, well, this was a *hunt*. Stalking." Will turned his head to stare up at the lofty ceiling. "Savagery."

Lecter smiled at him and set a photograph on the walnut surface, tapping it with his index. "These wings? Are they accurate to their namesake?" he asked.

Rounding the desk, Will leaned over his shoulder. The crimson smeared concrete was the same as before, long reaching wings seeking freedom from stone.

But...

Oh.

He saw it now.

“No... no, sparrow wings are more round,” he whispered, eyes widening. “Uh, shorter. Our killer wasn’t *mocking* the victim’s name with the wings, he chose him *because* of his name.”

Lecter tipped back his head a little to smile at him, leaning in a little closer. “If not a sparrow, what do these wings belong to?” he murmured. Spoken softly, privately, his voice was almost a caress.

“A bird of prey,” Will’s lips supplied before his brain fully caught on. His eyes snapped back to the photo. “They’re not pointed enough to be a falcon, and the end is blunted, see, which rules out a Cooper’s. It could possibly be a red tailed Hawk; they are fairly common in these parts.”

“Do they often hunt their fellow birds?” Doctor Lecter asked.

“Red-tailed Hawks aren’t fussy eaters. Some people call them chicken hawks for that very reason, although smaller birds are more likely targets.”

Smaller birds, like perhaps an unfortunate sparrow.

“Watching from above, spearing their prey with their talons, and picking apart flesh with their beaks. That seems quite familiar doesn’t it?”

Barely breathing, Will swallowed and nodded as he recalled the man’s mutilated abdomen. “Yes, that fits. He *admires* them,” he whispered. “He doesn’t believe himself to be a hawk in the literal sense, but he watches them. Knows them. Mimics them.”

“How closely does our boy pay homage to these creatures, do you think?” Lecter pressed, sliding the file closer to Will.

Stepping away and onto one of the Venetian rugs, Will tipped his head backwards and closed his eyes, allowing himself to brush against those memories of that excited, vibrating mind. He clenched his hands at his sides as he took several deep breaths.

“It was planned meticulously,” he whispered, “but the details were left to the moment, to the final thrill of the hunt. He did it to show off what he was, but he’s no artist. He lacks the creativity and the drive to create something new from his muses. He would stick close to form.”

He opened up eyes again and pointed up at ceiling.

“I think he watched his prey from above.”

Returning to Doctor Lecter at the desk, Will rifled through the file until he reached the victim’s profile, flicking through each page hurriedly in search of something specific.

“Our killer knew Sparrow stayed late at the office, so I think his perch was somewhere nearby. Could you look up this address on Google Street view?” Will asked, pulling out the victim’s work address.

“Of course,” Lecter replied, reaching for his tablet.

Will placed a hand on the back of the chair as he waited, tapping his nail against wood.

His knuckles ever so slightly brushed the smooth lining of Doctor Lecter’s waistcoat as the other man shifted in his seat. Will froze at the contact, but when his friend didn’t react to it, he allowed himself to relax a little and moved his hand to a safer location.

The feeling of the man’s warmth lightened on his skin longer than he would’ve liked.

“Here we are.” The doctor gestured towards the tablet, revealing an image of a busy street, facing towards a set of glass double doors.

Will hummed as he took it in, dragging his finger to inspect the surrounding scenery. The street was pleasant during the day, bustling and alive with activity. There were people in suits making their way through, food vendors, and a small collection of coffee shops and cafes with signs propped up outside making up the background. But during night, he could imagine it well. Dark and quiet with no company but the metal grated shop fronts and darkened windows.

He turned the view upwards and inspected the skyline. There was certainly no shortage of vantage spots among the high rise landscape.

“That one looks residential,” Lecter commented, tapping at a block slightly further down the street. Patterned curtains and potted plants lined some of the windows.

“Yes, that could work,” Will agreed, leaning over the doctor's shoulder to get a closer look. He was close enough to catch the scent of clean detergent on his clothes. “I wonder which apartments have the best visibility of the side walk.”

The doctor sipped his wine, tipping the glass slightly further upwards to get at the final dregs. As he set it down, he made a considerate noise. “How about an evening excursion to find out?”

“What, right now?”

“It’s as good a time as any,” Lecter said, smiling up at Will, lips slightly reddened by the drink. “Our killer hunted at night, so it would be the truest reconstruction of the events possible. A step into the shoes of his prey. I wonder if we could see something our less fortunate shrew missed.”

Stepping outside, Will stuffed his hands into his pockets and shivered a little at the blast of cold air that met them. With the darkness, a wintery chill had set in and he regretted only bringing his jacket.

The keys jingled as Doctor Lecter locked up.

"Ah, actually, it's gotten nippy," Lecter said, hand resting on the handle. "If you'll just give me one moment."

The doctor disappeared inside again, so Will bounced on the balls of his feet as he waited for him to return. It didn't take long before the door creaked open again.

"Here we are," Lecter said, holding out a scarf and gloves. "Something to keep you warm."

Will would've taken a step back had it not sent him careening down a flight of stairs, so he just shifted uncomfortably in place and stared at the man's cheekbone. "That's really not necessary."

The doctor closed and locked the door behind him. "Nonsense," he said, turning back around. "You're shivering."

Before he could figure a way to wriggle out of the offer, Lecter looped the cream coloured scarf over his head in one sure motion. With deft hands he tied a neat knot and tightened it so it sat just under Will's chin. The fabric was incredibly soft against his exposed neck, but he felt oddly suffocated as the man slightly adjusted the fabric, fingers brushing his jaw.

"There," he said once he was done. "Not so bad, is it?"

They drove separately to Washington, and with a little difficulty, found parking spaces only a couple block's walk from the office building. Coincidentally , the building site was barely a ten minute stroll extra.

Will was squinting at the parking meter to check the hours, when he heard a soft clearing of a throat just behind him. The sound made him freeze and he snapped around to find Doctor Lecter looming there as if he'd suddenly materialised from the shadows. He hadn't even heard the thunk of a car door.

"My apologies, I've been told I have a quiet tread," the man said with an unabashed tone, a pleased glint to his eye in the low light.

Will exhaled a sudden breathe. "Fucking hell, you're telling me," he muttered, straightening up. "Anyway, we're in luck, parking is free from 6.30pm."

"Excellent. Shall we?"

Nodding in return, Will fell into step beside him as they navigated the quiet streets. While the Doctor's shoes occasionally scuffed against the concrete, it was unnerving just how silent his movements were. The sounds he made almost seemed more deliberate than his silence, as if he only made them for Will's benefit. If he'd kept his eyes ahead, he almost could've deluded himself into believing he was walking alone.

It was much like his reconstruction of the scene that way, but there were a few lights illuminating the odd window this time. The flicker of a television visible through sheer curtains, the shifting shadows of people living their lives.

The presence of life gave the hunter's game an extra layer of risk, a tang of threat that he surely craved. He delighted in hiding in plain sight, this one.

"Our hawk enjoys that any sparrow could twitch aside their curtain and see him, doesn't he?" Will murmured to his companion.

"Any killer willing to stalk and chase in this environment has a streak of exhibitionism to their pathology," Lecter replied. "This boy is bold."

Will hummed in agreement. "A god complex, maybe?"

"Certainly the illusion of infallibility. I'm sure we'll soon discover how divine he truly is."

At Will's gesture, they crossed the street and came to find themselves stood at the foot of a tall building. A set of glass doors inscribed with the law firm's name confirmed that this was the place. Standing there was odd, unnerving. It felt vulnerable for a reason Will couldn't put his finger on.

"It seems that someone has stayed late," Lecter said, pointing upwards to a second story window where a dim light still glowed from the otherwise dark office building.

Will pursed his lips in understanding. "Perhaps that was how our killer knew when to strike. He learnt which office his victim worked in and all he had to do was look for when the light went out."

Spinning on his heels he turned to gaze at the surrounding skyline, searching for the perch among the swathes of branches and leaves. There were so many places, so many nooks and crannies to hide in. Eyes could be watching from anywhere.

What this how the rabbit felt when standing alone in a field? Everything was tensed in preparation for the pounce of some unseen foe.

"He would wait in darkness to obscure his position," he breathed, turning his eyes away from where the lights still shone. "Easier to see the streets when cast in shadow."

The doctor stood slightly behind him. "If the light going out was his warning, he would need swift access to the street. A hunter must be able to anticipate his prey's next move."

"Not the top floor then," Will murmured. "Something accessible but with a good vantage point."

His eyes finally fell on the apartment block just a little down the street, the same one Doctor Lecter had pointed out earlier that evening. It was close enough to have a good view of the firm's windows, but far enough away to make watchful eyes disappear among the foliage.

So many windows.

There was a shuffling noise as Lecter stepped closer.

“Do you have your gun, Will?” came the doctor’s whisper, a hand enveloping his shoulder, large enough to warm him through the layers of fabric.

Will’s body stiffened, the hairs at the back of his neck on end as the unsettling wrongness settled deeper into his bones. “Yes, I do. Why?”

“I believe we’re being watched. Third floor, second window from the left.”

Swallowing, Will raised his head.

One.

Two.

Three up.

One.

Two across.

The window was a black chasm, yet unlike many of the other darkened windows, there was no curtain pulled across it, the room within devoid of any source of illumination. Instead the fabric hung to one side, a glint of a reflection visible just above the windowsill, so small he would’ve missed it had he not been searching for it.

“That’s a lens, isn’t it?” he murmured.

“I believe so.”

The darkness *moved*. It was the slightest shift, barely a step back, but it made Will’s heart thunder in his ears.

“He’s there.”

Before he knew quite what he was doing, he was crossing the street, a walk ramping up into a run. His shoes slapped the sidewalk, so loud and stark in the otherwise dim drone of the sleeping city.

The apartment block rose from the concrete and the closer he got, the more towering and imposing it became, like a fortress of steel and stone. Halfway along the buildings front was a staircase that lead up to the entrance, the foyer visible behind the lightly frosted glass.

He tried the door, pushing and then pulling to be sure, but it didn’t budge.

Looking around the entrance, he saw the fob sensor and then the panel of buzzers. “Shit,” he muttered to himself, stepping back. “*Shit*.”

“Locked, is it?” Lecter said, finally catching up to him as he ascended the short staircase.

“Yes, it looks like you need an access key to get in. He definitely spotted us,” Will replied, his fingers twitching, eyes darting about. “We need to get in somehow.”

The doctor smiled at him, patting his elbow as he squeezed past to get to the intercom. He pressed a button on the panel seemingly at random and waited.

“*Erm, hello?*” was the response after a few seconds.

Lecter winked at Will and leant towards the intercom. “I’m so sorry to bother you, but I’m hoping to visit the occupant of flat 3b. I’m not able to reach them currently, so could you possibly buzz me in?” he asked, putting on a voice laced with deferent politeness.

“*Oh, sure thing. Just a sec!*”

“Ah, thank you so much.”

After a moment there was a low buzz and the clunk of the lock releasing. Will found himself staring at his companion as the man held the door open for him. “You best hurry, Will. Hawks have a tendency to fly,” he warned.

So he did.

Up and up and up he went. Step after step, taking two at a time.

He was numb to the burn of his legs and the panting of his breath as he reached the third story landing, half stumbling, half sprinting through the stairwell exit.

He heard the slam of another door.

The light of the corridor was bright and it blinded his night accustomed eyes, his glasses fogging from the heat of his breath.

The first thing he saw was the darkly dressed figure sprinting away from him.

“FBI!” he yelled, struggling with his jacket as he pursued. “Stop right there!”

The man didn’t hesitate at the sound of his voice, their twin thundering strides striking down the hallway. Will was at a disadvantage and the unknown man was fast on his feet, slipping out of sight as he turned the corner.

Will almost bounced against the wall as he reached the end of the corridor and turned, but he was met by the sudden sight of an empty passageway. He halted and stared, but then he spotted an open window about halfway down. Running over he gripped the frame and saw a figure slipping down onto the ground below, sprinting off into the dark of the alleyway.

“Fuck,” he hissed, ducking under the window and sticking his head outside.

The wind was like icy needles on his flushed skin, blood still rushing past his ears. The man was long out of sight, but he could see the network of window ledges and gutters he’d used to climb down.

He was half tempted to follow until he heard the sound of his name.

“Will!” Doctor Lecter called a second time.

With a sigh, he returned to the warmth of the apartment block, and retraced his steps. His shoulders sagged at the sight of Doctor Lecter at the other end of the corridor. “He got away,” he said through his heavy breaths, taking off his glasses to clear the lenses. “Went out the window before I could get to him.”

“Let us not underestimate this man. I don’t believe he’ll be so simple to catch,” Lecter said, before he turned his head away and pointed a finger. “Although, we may have more pressing matters to attend to now. Something tells me our hawk was not this apartment’s original owner.”

As he got closer, he realised that the door had been left slightly ajar, still slowly swaying on its hinges from the aftermath of a hurried exit.

It was the second from the left.

Now not buzzing with adrenaline, he managed to unbutton his jacket and pull out his gun. “Best stay behind me, Doctor. Just in case.”

He butted the door with the barrel and it whined as it swung open, slowly revealing a gloomy hallway.

“FBI,” he called into the dark. “If someone is inside, please make yourself known now!”

Waiting with bated breath, he steadied his hold on the firearm. After a few seconds, there was no reply so he took a step forward, pushing his way inside.

At first nothing appeared out of place, carpet underfoot and a row of shoes left by the door. Women’s shoes, he noted with a slight sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach. Too small for a man with size 11 feet. The air had a hint of mustiness to it, a sour tang of something neglected. Photo frames lined the walls, one of them knocked askew and left uncorrected.

A door on the right led to a cramped kitchen, dirty dishes piled up high in the sink and cup noodle containers strewn across the laminated floor. The beginnings of mould had started to take root on the uneaten food. Small fruit flies floated about in the air.

A dead end.

The other door opened into larger room, an unmade bed on one side, chairs and tables on the other.

The strange smell was stronger in there.

Walking forward, Will stepped over unfolded clothes, approaching the hawk’s perch. The glass misted under his breaths, but he could see the street were they’d been only minutes before. The lamp light in the office opposite still shone bright in the night.

“He took photographs of us,” Will said, gazing at the empty tripod set up by the window. There was no sign of the source of the reflection.

“Cameras hold more damning evidence than a telescope or binoculars ever could,” Doctor Lecter replied lowly. His voice was soft as if it might disturb the darkness surrounding them to speak louder. “The images we take are a glimpse into our desires, a fleeting betrayal of our inner workings.”

Will’s saliva soured on his tongue.

The hawk had a picture of *him* on that damn camera.

As if he needed to catch the attention of yet another serial killer. The Chesapeake Ripper was handful just by himself.

When he glanced back at Lecter, he found the man wandering the room and inspecting the furnishings with his nose in the air, drawing in the occasional deep breath. It reminded him of the way search dogs would sample their surroundings, nostrils flaring at a sharp exhale.

“Ah,” the doctor said, crouching down beside the bed. “What a coincidence.”

Will approached in silence to see what he was looking at. At their feet, shoved between two pieces of furniture was a twisted and crumpled suit jacket. Even in the dark, it was clearly stained with patches of dried fluid.

He was almost certain it would be a match of Mr Sparrow's missing blazer.

A sudden noise made Will pause and tighten his grip on the gun. Straightening up, he turned around and listened more closely to see if it’d happen again.

“Did you hear that?” he whispered.

“Yes,” the doctor replied just as softly.

There it was again.

A drip.

And another.

And then another.

They both turned to the only door remaining, sharing a mutual glance of understanding. It was a silent signal for both of them to approach, the bad smell growing stronger with each step.

Lecter hung back as Will rapped his knuckles against the pine wood door. After a moment, he didn’t hear anything from within apart from that steady rhythmic drip. He reached for the handle and turned.

Slowly the door swung inwards.

The wave of putrid air that hit him knocked him back, his shoulder clipping the doctor's as they both recoiled. Gagging, Will clutched for door frame to steady himself. With each breath in more of more of that sickly sweet stench coated the inside of his nose, so strong he could almost taste it on his tongue. It was all consuming, acrid. Like the smell of meat left in the trash after a hot summers day but fermented and concentrated down.

Inescapable.

He dropped his gun and pulled the scarf over his nose and mouth. The smell of Doctor Lecter's clothes helped dampen the odour, but his eyes still watered as he ran his hand along the wall in search of a light switch.

With a click, a bulb flickered to life, illuminating the horror within.

The floor was littered with empty bags that'd once contained ice, only small puddles of water remaining.

The bathtub's facet occasionally dripped, each droplet striking the surface of still, murky water, sending out tiny ripples in their wake.

In the water was the body of an older woman.

She was still wearing a nightgown, but the white cotton had long been stained brown from the putrefying mix of organ soup and excrement she was laying in. Her eyes were wide and unseeing, pearly and bulging out of their sockets.

She'd been dead long enough for her body to bloat, her skin a discoloured patchwork of rot, hands curled in on themselves like gangrenous sausages. Black and rash red and patches of sickly green. Teeth were visible behind the bloated mass of her swollen tongue, yellowed with neglect.

The decay was advanced enough that Will found himself trapped between the horror of the sight and the ticking and whirring of his mind as it so desperately tried to reverse time, unable to separate the trauma of her death and simply the work of bacteria and enzymes digesting muscle and fat.

Despite his better judgement, he stepped closer and leant in, the smell causing his vision to blur with tears. Blinking rapidly, he saw a band of something dark wrapped around her neck.

Tights.

She'd been strangled to death with her own tights.

He retreated back out of the restroom, gasping for fresh air, but finding little reprieve.

Raising his head, he searched out Doctor Lecter who'd retreated towards the window. In the dim light he stood like a spectre in the dark, light glancing off his dark, piercing eyes.

Voice thick with the urge to gag, Will allowed the scarf to drop away from his mouth.

“Call Jack,” he said.

Chapter End Notes

Hello again! Apologies for the delay, but thank you for popping by nonetheless.

To be honest I should've just titled this chapter 'In Which the Kinsey Scale Begins to Slide' but I'll allow Will to cling to his heterosexuality for a while longer lol.

Link to art of Will in his new scarf

Do let me know if you enjoyed the chapter! While I'm not great about responding, please know that I cherish every comment and interaction with my works.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!